All *Last House on Dead End Street* articles and interviews (pages 67 to 143) are by *David Kerekes* unless stated otherwise.

It's about time I dedicated something to Stefan Jaworzyn, and this without question is the most suited place to do it. It was Stefan, editor of *Shock Xpress*, who took it upon himself to commission an engineer from north Manchester to write a piece on an obscure horror movie by the name of *Last House on Dead Street*. In the grand scheme of things, his phonecall some fifteen years ago, has brought us here — to this article; to Headpress. Thanks, Stefan.

Previous page **Roger Watkins as 'Terry Hawkins', image from a 1973 local newspaper report on the production of *Last House on Dead End Street*.**

I was drawn to films that were elusive. Up until fairly recently many desirable films remained nigh on impossible to see, whether through a lack of distribution, being deemed 'lost', or the prohibitive film laws that exists in countries like Britain. Granted, many of the films that I found desirable twenty-or-so years ago were hardly likely to excite any entrepreneur into hunting them down and championing their release — these were low budget genre efforts that I had read about, curious marginalised efforts that seemed somehow magical in their elusiveness but rarely bore any commercial clout. Often the reasons behind a film's failings or the nature of its short, troubled history, were as interesting — if not more so — than the film itself.

These were films ripped from cinema's timeline. Where on earth was Thomas Edison's 1910 *Frankenstein*, and how had it become 'lost'? An evocative production photograph of actor Charles Ogle as the creature appeared to be all that was left of this first screen adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel. But in that photograph lay *mystery*.

And where were the films of Jean Rollin, a prolific fantasy director vilified in his native France and ignored for the most part by distributors everywhere else? Tantalising descriptions and rich, deco poster art for several of his films appeared in David Pirie's *The Vampire Cinema*, a book dating back to 1977 (and which stands as one of the first true innovative texts on modern genre cinema).

There were of course many other must-see movies, but — in the days before home entertainment — a lot of patience, perseverance and good fortune was required by anyone actively seeking them out. The bottom

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GET SNUFFED! or, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND MOVE IN . . . 'LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET'

"WORST FILM.....KIDS LOVE IT"
ATLANTA FILM FESTIVAL
"MAKES TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE LOOK LIKE CHILDSPLAY"
"MORE RAW HORROR THAN FRIDAY THE 13th and HALLOWEEN COMBINED"
LAST HOUSE
ON DEAD END
STREET
CULT CLASSIC

Last House on Dead End Street

LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET. USA 1977. Dir: Victor Janos. With: Steven Morrison, Dennis Crawford, Lawrence Bornman, Paul Phillips, Elaine Norcross, Alex Kregar.

You've always had a special place in your heart for my movies, haven't you Steve? You've always been amazed at how real they look, haven't you Steve? The sound of a heartbeat. Credits fade in over a plain backcloth. The credits end. Heartbeat stops. A figure wanders into shot. 'No one's interested in sex anymore,' it murmurs, 'sex is boring.'

So begins *Last House on Dead End Street*, a film in which all the main characters sport renegade *Two Lane Blacktop* haircuts, including in particular Terry Hawkins – the wandering figure – mean, moody and mumbling. 'I'm gonna do something no one's ever done before,' he voice-overs. He wants to make movies. He wants to make a name for himself, and he wants . . . a little notoriety.

How about porn? Nope, *people have got tastes that have become very hard to satisfy*, so porn is a non-starter. *Something no one's ever done before.* Cut to shot of Terry in a surgical mask pulling the insides from a pretty young girl. That's basically it. Terry starts making snuff movies with the aid of some old buddies: Bill, the best cameraman in the business (the only cameraman Terry knows in the business); a couple of girlfriends who convince each other that prostitution isn't such a bad thing and who wouldn't mind being in the movies; and – most notably – Ken, a guy who says 'daddio' too often for comfort.

Without much consideration for timescale, *Dead End Street* has characters being killed under Bill's watchful camera eye; revealing to us that Terry has been very successful in his movie venture. So much so, in fact, that his business associates, Palmer, maker of porn films, and Steve, Palmer's financier, both try to take credit and oust Terry from the limelight. Stupid . . . Terry invites them, Palmer's wife, Nancy, and Susy(!), a friend of Nancy, to his house . . . *the* house . . . The house on DEAD END STREET!

Needless to say, the four are dispatched, rather horribly, one by one. Camera rolling, Terry gets all philosophical (with heavy reverb on his voice) and tells his four captives 'Tonight I'm going to let you all into my little secret . . . ' The film crew don their death masks.

Terry brands Susy with a branding iron, gives a little speech (*the answer is me*) and cuts her throat wide open. One down.

After a little playful romping (*how's your sex life, Palmer?*), Palmer is put in front of the camera and told he is going to play a part in Terry's new film. When Palmer shows scant regard for the script by attempting to run away, Terry knocks him to the floor, screaming 'I'm directing this fucking movie! I'm directing this fucking movie!' until he has kicked him to death. Everyone laughs except Steve and Nancy.

You're next, Mrs. Palmer. Mock operating theatre; surgical masks; a tray of – yuk – surgical instruments; and Nancy, strapped down securely . . . Lights! Action! First, her feet are sawn off at the ankles. When she faints, Terry brings her round with smelling salts. She sees her lack of feet and faints again. A huge pair of wire cutters are brought in. Blood . . .

And last . . . 'Hi Steve, how ya bin? Scared?' Steve runs, but Terry and his merry men grab him by the head and bring him to his knees, Steve constantly pleading. One of the death-girls removes her mask, takes off her blouse and unzips her trousers to reveal – believe it or not – a goat's hoof jutting her fly. She remains passive as Steve is forced to lick the hoof. Steve pleads on.

'What's the matter, Steve?' Terry asks. 'Feelin' horny?' Well, that's it! The gang cracks up in hysterics. Seeing his chance, Steve makes another break for it, running down darkened corridors through the house . . . running into a room full of lights. Out of the light step the wrecking crew, deadly serious. Terry approaches Steve, power drill in hand . . . and drills right through Steve's open eye.

End of movie.

First of all, just who is Victor Janos, and why *Last House on Dead End Street*? Who knows? End of review . . . almost . . .

Disregard the possibility of any similarities between *Dead End Street* and its namesake, *Last House on the Left*; these are merely superfluous, that is both films harbour social outcasts and ex-cons, and both films climax with acts of vengeance – though in each for opposing reasons. No, if *Dead End Street* has to be likened to anything, then it would be most appropriate to compare it to Lustig's *Maniac*, what with their ultra-bleak outlooks and similar 'take-it-or-fuck-off' attitudes. It would also seem, judging from the 'look' of *Last House* that director Janos was on native soil in America when he made it. It has none of the trappings of an alien view of an alien place as, say, Jorge Grau's oddly romantic picture of England in *The Living Dead At Manchester Morgue*; *Dead End Street* appears very much an American movie, not a European movie Americanised. However, the use of pseudonyms in the credits – authentic as they appear – cannot be totally disregarded. Has anyone ever heard of those names . . .?

For a low-budgeter, *Dead End Street* is surprisingly well photographed, its unsettling intensity being far too well orchestrated to be dismissed as *chance* atmosphere. Despite the final reels, Janos curtails the violence, working it around the claustrophobia and into the film. The early scenes of carnage are somewhat superficial – when Terry imagines himself pulling bloody bits from the dead girl in the opening scenes, and when slaughterhouse footage is used simply because Terry's buddy Ken says he used to work in one, Janos would seem more interested in establishing a style; the horror of interiors and unpredictable bastards, as opposed to out-and-out gut horror.

That the film relies heavily on situation horror only confirms it as fitting into the mould of cult cinema besides that of the more obvious exploitation field – forced camera angles; pseudo-classical music; confusing narrative, and almost total animosity – surely all epitomising weird and wonderful cults? But so bleak? No . . . To say it is bleak beyond description would be unfair. Beneath its humourless premise, there is a virtual torrent of gags! And at least *one* honest laugh.

Alas, things are just too bleak to get much funnier than that . . . *David Kerekes*

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end of the theatrical double-bill at the local movie houses were a godsend for the elusive film enthusiast. Things changed somewhat with the video boom of the eighties. But while this helped sound the death knell for independent film distribution and the quirky cinema programming, it brought instead a black market trade in rare movies on videotape. By the nineties, videotape, the networking created by the fanzine press and the ambiguous laws governing copyright in the US, saw a surfeit of small Stateside mail order outlets dedicated to rare films on video. (For instance, segments of Edison's *Frankenstein* have recently been unearthed and are now available on videocassette courtesy of such independent companies.) Of course more recently, DVD and the internet has brought an even greater accessibility to once hard-to-find films.

Interwoven around one particularly elusive film, this article spans almost two decades, beginning with the boom in video and ending in the era of DVD. I make no bones about the fact that at times it's something of a personal odyssey.

I was drawn to films that were elusive, and fewer were more elusive than *Last House on Dead End Street*. I first became aware of the title in the pages of Michael Weldon's book, *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*. Its review (see previous page) was relegated to a single paragraph, and closed with the line 'Have you ever heard anyone even admit that they saw it?' — an open invitation if ever there was one. The accompanying poster showed a large old house, over which positive press comments from dubious sources were emblazoned.*

'Worst film... kids love it'
— Atlanta Film Festival

'Makes Texas Chain Saw Massacre look like childsplay'
— Miami Sci-Fi and Horror Festival

'More raw horror than Friday the 13th and Halloween combined'
— Minneapolis Film Festival

In the bottom right of the poster was the simple statement 'Cult Classic'. *A cult classic?* Why had I never heard of it? This was the early eighties and I considered myself pretty savvy when it came to horror films, thanks to a youth misspent on an abundance of books and publications devoted to the subject. I doubted the authenticity of the film. Even the names associated with it — director Victor Janos, producer Norman F Kaiser, screenwriter Brian Lawrence — were unfamiliar and highly suspect. I considered the whole thing a hoax.

And yet I still inquired after it.

I soon happened across an even earlier reference to the film in the third issue of the short-lived US zine *Demonique* — a review by editor Barry Kaufman which concludes with the line:

'Definitely not for the uninitiated, it will probably be rated X if it turns up at the drive-ins in '81.'

Kaufman goes into a little more plot detail and reproduces extracts of dialogue, but the credits listed for the film differ completely to those in Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia*. According to *Demonique*, *Last House on Dead End Street* is supposedly directed by one Eric Jason, a pseudonym apparently for (the equally mysterious) Enrique Jesutos. Furthermore, Kaufman believes it to be a 'foreign horror', belonging 'in a group with *Autopsy*, *The Tempter* and the like; absolute trash but somehow irresistible'.

The review didn't convince me of the film's existence — I merely suspected that here may have lain the origins of the hoax.

The myth was growing.

A friend of mine living in France pointed out that (Victor) Janos is an anagram of (Eric) Jason. My hoax idea was blown out of the water when he later told me that he owned a US theatrical poster for *Last House on Dead End Street*.

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* Only years later did it strike me that the foreboding, yet pleasingly shaped house on the poster was actually a mirror image of itself.

A guy in the US with whom I had recently started corresponding (he referred to himself as, I think, The Horror Expert) reckoned he could get hold of a copy of the film. Sure enough, several months later I received a videotape in the mail. Because the tape was in the US standard of NTSC however, and this being the eighties, I had no way of viewing what was on it (multi region VHS systems were in the Space Program price bracket, and tape conversion companies charged by the minute).

The videocassette made a round trip to France for conversion: my friend there with the poster had expressed an interest in seeing the film and knew someone with a NTSC video player — though the conversion consisted of taping the film directly off a TV screen using a camcorder. The result arrived with a note attached stating that the conversion wasn't ideal, but neither was it that bad considering the poor quality of the original.

(Over the years I would get the opportunity to see other copies of the film, none of which differed greatly in terms of quality. Indeed, Harvey Fenton states on his FAB website: 'I have seen this film projected from a 35mm blow-up in a regular cinema [The Imperial in Montreal]. Anyone thinking their washed-out video is a bad dupe will be relieved to hear that it looks just as bad on celluloid — looks like the whole film was overexposed...')

I sat and watched the tape.

Over a black backdrop (dark blue in actuality, thanks to the transfer), a heartbeat pounded. The face of a young man appeared, puffing on a cigarette. It wasn't a particularly clear face and it suffered from a ghost — as did every other image on the tape, a psychedelic eye-straining glitch accentuated whenever there was any movement onscreen. But these were faults of the transfer — at least I was finally getting to see the film I had doubted even existed, not to mention one that, according to the *Psychotronic Encyclopedia*, no one would ever admit to having seen.

I admitted to it.

My admitting to it led to my first published piece: a review of the film in *Shock Xpress* magazine. Vol 2 No 1, Summer 1987 (see page 69). Not the best piece of writing in the world, I'll admit...

Following this I managed to acquire a US onesheet for *Last House on Dead End Street*. It differed to the poster appearing in *Psychotronic* in that rather than a bunch of reviews, the wording above the house read

It's Back! The evil that had you screaming...
IT'S ONLY A MOVIE!

(Back from where?) The tagline was obviously a more aggressive attempt by the distributors to link the film to Wes Craven's much more famous 1972 feature *Last House on the Left* — the phrase 'It's Only a Movie' had figured extensively in the latter's advertising.

I wrote at length about *Last House on Dead End Street* in mine and David Slater's 1994 book, *Killing For Culture*, and lamented (again): 'Just who is Victor Janos? Any attempt to trace the names behind *Last House on Dead End Street* will lead no further than the credits themselves, all obviously fake.'

Six years later I had the answer. To prove to myself it was the right one however, I had to travel halfway around the world.

This part of our story opens in December 2000, when I received word from several people to check out the messageboard on the FAB website: someone there was claiming to be the director of *Last House on Dead End Street*. Quite an excitable thread of conversation had developed around this guy calling himself Roger Watkins, aka the elusive Victor Janos. There was much to be sceptical about — after all it had been over two decades since that film was released, during which time there hadn't been so much as a peep from any of the people involved in its production. Then again, why would anyone claim to have directed *Last House on Dead End Street*, of all things, if it wasn't true? ■

EXTRACTS FROM THE

FAB PRESS MESSAGEBOARD

Robert Monell (10/11/00 8:40:06 am)
LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET
My favorite US horror film of the 1970's. It goes beyond horror, really... I am looking for detailed discussion and info on this elusive title. Does anyone know exactly where the director is at this moment? Is anyone even sure who the director is? Any thoughts on the film itself?

Harvey Fenton (10/14/00 5:22:22 am)
DEAD END
The director's real identity seems to be lost — a bit of a Dead End in itself... Seems he quit the business never to be heard from again (rumours are that the film is a barely-finished student project that somehow got picked up for theatrical release).
I have seen this film projected from a 35mm blow-up in a regular cinema (The Imperial in Montreal). Anyone thinking their washed-out video is a bad dupe will be relieved to hear that it looks just as bad on celluloid — looks like the whole film was over-exposed...
Still, this film is untouchable for demented atmospherics.

Jaun Foam (10/14/00 5:26:03 am)
Re: DEAD END
It's amazing that it was ever released theatrically. Few horror films of any kind are as subversive. I've heard that the lead actor and the director are one and the same. I've also gotten response that the director is now a technician on THE HOWARD STERN SHOW!

pnest (11/27/00 2:56:32 pm)
LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET
The film was made in 1973 on a budget of under $3,000.
I wrote, produced, directed and edited the film. I also played the role of Terry Hawkins. The original title was THE CUCKOO CLOCKS OF HELL. It's premier in 1974 caused theater riots in NYC and Chicago (where the theater was burned down. I was a guest on Howard Stern which is probably the cause of your misinformation. Altogether I made fourteen features under various and sundry pseudonymns (Richard Mahler, Victor Janos and Roger Watkins.

anthony timpson (11/28/00 4:38:30 pm)
GOOD PRANK
Hmmmnn, great fiction... this guy offers nothing new to the debate, all the information he provides is old hat — all can be garnered from PSYCHOTRONIC and SLEAZOID EXPRESS [...]

pnest (11/28/00 5:45:35 pm)
PRANK?
I usually don't like challenges but I'll tell you one or two things only I or someone

close to the production would know would know: Ken Fisher played Ken the lover of cows, Kathy Kurtin was the shorter of the two girls, Pat Canestro the other. Bill Schlageter was the film maker. The entire film was made in a building in Oneonta New York called Old Main except for some scenes shot in a railroad roundhouse. Proffesor Paul Jensen of SUNY Oneonta film department played the blind guy. (He still teaches there). The film is the only feature ever to be shot on 16mm Ansco Film and later blown to 35mm. It was the subject of a law suit that went to the NYS Supreme Court and won. (McGraw vs. Watkins). What else would you like to know? The budget was actually $800 and was used entirely to keep me in amphetamines and alcohol for the two weeks or less it took to film the picture. The distributors still owe me three million. Roger Watkins

anthony timpson (11/28/00 6:33:04 pm)

I'M SOLD...

thanks for rising to the challenge. I graciously stand corrected. [...]

anthony timpson (11/28/00 8:15:45 pm)

SCREENPLAY SOLD TO HARRY NILSON AND TERRY SOUTHERN

Was a screenplay that you wrote developed by Harry Nilson and Terry Southern? Called OBITUARIES? a black comedy about a frustrated tabloid reporter who goes to Texas to investigate a strange obituary notice and enters the bizarre, surreal world of a group of crazy millionaires from which he never returns.

pnest (11/29/00 7:36:56 am)

DEAR ANTHONY:

I wrote OBITUARIES way back in 1982. Harry Nilsson immediately purchased it and the two of us stayed high and drunk for the next three years. If I were my wife I would have left me about a year and a half before she did. I was appalled when I read the changes Nilsson and Southern made during their drug induced psychosis. It was worse than THE TELEPHONE, the embarassing epic they made with the non talented Whoopi Goldberg. But at least Harry paid me. [...]

pnest (11/29/00 11:54:55 am)

DEAR ANTHONY PS

Wait a minute wait a minute!!! I DID do a picture called DECADENCE (where do distributors get these crumby titles)? back in 1988 when I needed some quick cash. It was the only video I ever wrote and directed and I haven't seen it since I supervised the editing. The money boy was too cheap to even give me a copy and I refuse to buy such garbage. [...] As I recall it was fairly pretensious but had some interesting elements like people watch tv while the people they're watching on tv are watching them on tv. I thought it was interesting at the time now it just sounds silly. Know anybody that wants to do a sequel to HOUSE? It's already written.

PAUL M JENSEN plays the blind man killed at the beginning of *Last House on Dead End Street*. A professor at SUNY–Oneonta at the time the film was shot, he remains in teaching today and is the author of several best-selling books, including *Boris Karloff and His Films* (Barnes & Co, 1974), *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* (Zwemmer/Barnes & Co, 1969) and *The Men Who Made The Monsters* (Twayne, 1996).
Mr Jensen kindly supplied the following observations and thoughts in July of 2001 — which include passages from notes he was keeping back in the early seventies — spurred by a handful of my questions.

Notes on Roger Watkins
by Paul M Jensen

DAVID KEREKES: Roger says that he only cared about the horror genre until he met you and that, in his own words, you "broadened my horizons... turned me onto Bergman and Fellini. Especially Fellini." Did he and his ideas sit comfortably with you or his fellow students?

PAUL JENSEN: I started teaching film at SUNY–Oneonta in the fall of 1967, in what was then called the Speech and Theater Department. (It is now the Department of Communication Arts.) At that time I was still in my early twenties and so was not much older than my students. Thus, for a time at least, I was as likely to socialise with students as with other members of the faculty. Although I do not recall a specific occasion when I first met Roger, I assume he had enrolled in one of my film classes. He definitely arrived with a strong interest in and knowledge about film as a viewer, and with a passion for it as a filmmaker. He had already made several 8mm films well before our paths crossed. From the start, his interest and his knowledge and his passion would have been obvious, and very likely he stopped in at my office to chat.

We soon discovered a shared commitment to horror and fantasy films and if our tastes did not exactly coincide there was considerable overlap. For example, we both admired Ken Russell's *The Devils* and Orson Welles' *The Trial*, as well as Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and his more personal and highly original *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. We certainly shared a fondness for Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General*, responding to its bleakness and to its very skilled and sensitive visuals. (In the early 1970s, very few people had even heard of that film.)

As a side note, the first time I showed *Witchfinder General* in a Film Genres class, in the early or mid seventies, I announced it under its American title, *The Conqueror Worm*. As a result, quite a lot of students who were not enrolled in the class came to the screening, expecting a film about a giant worm that devours Cleveland or some other city, a film that they were fully prepared to ridicule. However, from its first moments *Witchfinder General* evoked no condescending laughter. Instead, for the entire length of the film this cynical and superior audience just cringed and squirmed. I was pleased! Occasionally, afterward, a student would ask in pained bewilderment why I had shown a film that created such an uncomfortable experience. "Well," I usually replied, "what sort of feeling do you expect from something called a 'horror film'?" The point, though, is not that the film grossed them out (they

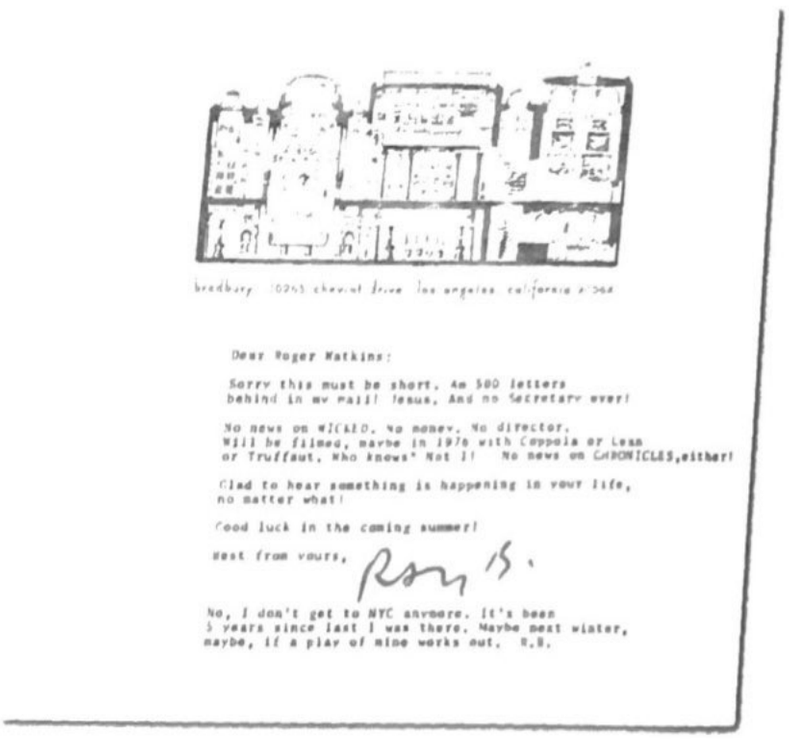
Roger Watkins
April 1972

thought they saw far more blood than was actually shown), but that it made them *feel* in rather complex ways. I know Roger respected that film and I think he probably also respected me for showing it to a class and defending it.

Our conversations ranged widely, and if I was able to introduce him to the films of Ingmar Bergman (*Hour of the Wolf* became a favourite) and Federico Fellini, he introduced me to Lou Reed's album, *Berlin*, which remains one of my favourite depressing works, and also to the songs of Tom Waits.

Roger has a keen and most impressive intelligence. He was interested in all of the creative arts, from literature and theatre through music and art. He appreciated the music of Richard Wagner and Gustav Mahler. As a student, he acted in several plays, including Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Although he revealed no desire to cultivate himself as an actor, his intelligence and intensity resulted in a powerful stage presence.

Roger and I may have had a great deal in common, but our personalities contrasted enough that we complemented each other effectively. He was intense and extreme — in his opinions, in his emotions, and at times in his actions. When he found some creative work that attracted him, he devoured it. If it were music, he would listen to it over and over again, until he had in effect absorbed it, until it became a part of him. I'm sure that most people perceived Roger as rather wild and unpredictable, possessed of a sensual recklessness that made him seem dangerous, yet attractive (to women, at least). Rather Byronic, in that way. At the same time, Roger's sensitive side led him to respond to delicate moments as in, for example, *The Innocents*. I, on the other hand, was rational and objective and careful, yet we did take a few not-too-extreme walks on the wild side together.



Dear Roger Watkins:

Sorry this must be short. Am 500 letters behind in my mail! Jesus. And no Secretary ever!

No news on WICKED. No money. No director. Will be filmed, maybe in 1976 with Coppola or Leon or Truffaut. Who knows? Not I! No news on CHRONICLES, either!

Glad to hear something is happening in your life, no matter what!

Good luck in the coming summer!

Best from yours,

No, I don't get to NYC anymore. It's been 5 years since last I was there. Maybe next winter, maybe, if a play of mine works out. R.B.

Letter from Ray Bradbury. May 1975

Can you tell us about your part in *Last House on Dead End Street*, and working on the film?
Do you recall the masks that the 'murderers' in the film swap amongst themselves, and how that idea came about?

Roger had made many short films, both before attending SUNY–Oneonta and while here, and in them I could see that he pos-

sessed the three necessities for a worthwhile film career: assertiveness, talent, and originality. The fact that his originality often involved concepts that went against standard outlooks did not strike me as either good or bad. The fact that this was done honestly, not cynically, did make a difference, as did the fact that the results were fresh and vivid. When, in the winter of 1972–73, Roger decided to shoot a feature film during the break between the fall and spring semesters, I could not help but think that if anyone would achieve this, he would. Roger had always, it seemed, made films. He did not wait for someone to offer him the chance; he just *did* it. So this would be the same thing, only on a larger scale.

Orson Welles once said that there are two kinds of people: those whose first reaction to an idea is to say "no" and list the reasons why it cannot work, and those whose first reaction is to say "yes" and set about making it work. When Roger described his plan, I realised that it sounded impossible and even foolhardy, but I also realised that I must at this moment be one of Welles' "yes" people. I had no idea if it could be done or how it could be done, but I decided to do what I could to help it happen. That was partly because Roger was my friend. But it was also because I believed he was a talented and determined individual who deserved the chance. This was especially the case because he did not expect anything to be handed to him. I knew he would work much harder than anyone else.

I, of course, was not the only one to support the project and I can not claim a significant amount of credit. It is, however, possible that I functioned as a pivotal figure in the sense that others probably thought that if I — an upright-seeming, necktie-wearing 'establishment' figure — supported the project, then it would be OK for them to support it, too.

A significant supporter of the film was Pete Sabedra, who at that time was employed as the theatre's stage carpenter, in charge of set construction and such matters. If I permitted access to a 16mm camera for filming, it was through Pete that Roger and company obtained use of lighting equipment. Beyond that, Pete was very helpful in terms of solving the inevitable unexpected physical problems.

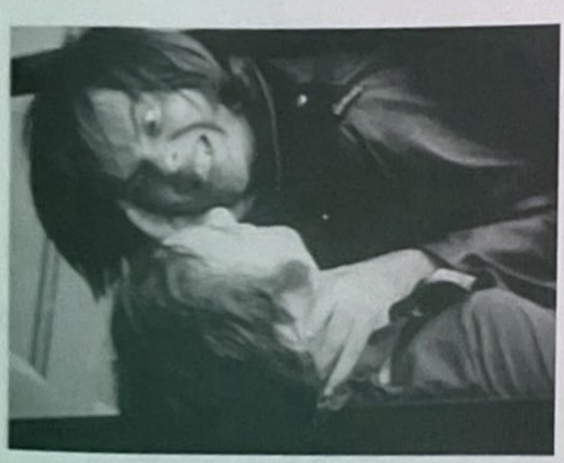
Thinking back, I am amazed at the cooperation and eagerness of everyone involved. These people were available when needed, they worked odd and very long hours (some nights from 6:00 or 7:00 pm until 3:00 or 4:00 am), they did some very strange or awkward things for the camera, they did it all for nothing — and I don't recall hearing complaints or criticisms. I think everyone realised that the only way such a no-budget film would get noticed is if it were outrageous or extreme, or both, so they just accepted it all. Besides, they knew Roger.

Ken Fisher was a mainstay of the production. He operated the camera, but he also played a major part, so when he was onscreen someone else held the camera — anyone who happened to be available. I recall doing it a

Roger's signed picture of sixties pop icon Joey Heatherton.

few times. In addition, Ken became a kind of reliable, responsible organiser. The key people got very little sleep while working on the film, including Ken, but it was Ken who showed up at Roger's door to wake him when it was time to "go to work." It is my impression that in many ways Ken held the production together.

The first shooting date that I find mentioned in some notes I made at the time is December 29, 1972, when we worked in a new, stark-looking dormitory that stood in for the film's prison. Most of the shooting, however, took place in January 1973. (More shooting probably occurred later. For example, I don't recall exactly when the scenes filmed in the old railroad round house, including my 'death', were done.)



Roger, as Terry Hawkins, loses it with Palmer in *Last House on Dead End Street.*

On January 2, we filmed my first scene as the blind caretaker, along with much else. Regarding my role: I'm sure Roger wanted to have me in the film and I'm sure I liked the idea of participating onscreen. At the same time, anyone who was willing to be in it pretty much got to be in it; all volunteers were needed and utilised. Many of the people who acted in the film had acted in campus theatrical productions and probably hoped for careers in the profession, so this was seen as useful experience, at the very least. (One man, who played 'Palmer', was a theatre professor who directed plays and occasionally acted. He volunteered to be in the film because he trusted Roger's talent and he wanted to know what acting for the camera was like.) I, however, had had virtually no acting experience and did not feel competent, plus I could not commit the time needed for a larger role. Therefore, the part of a blind man who does little and never speaks sounded just right to me, especially as I had only three scenes: one in which I am alive, one in which I am killed, and one in which I have been dead for some time.

A complication soon arose when a student complained to one of the college deans that Roger was using college-owned equipment for a private project. I don't remember anything else about this student or his motivation, but I imagine there was some kind of vindictiveness involved. This complaint set off a "fairly substantial chain reaction", according to my notes at the time, so Pete and I had to meet with the department's chairman and explain. Somehow we worked things out and I am still impressed that our chairman, a rather traditional man, allowed us to continue as long as either Pete or I were present and "in charge" during filming. The student who stirred up this trouble was named Palmer so Roger immediately gave that name to one of the film's characters and, I am sure, took pleasure in tormenting that 'Palmer' later.

On January 12, we "cut up Nancy," as I concisely wrote in my notes. The special effects for that scene were, like everything else, no-budget and rather improvised. As I recall, the table on which she lay had a hole cut in the centre into which the actress placed her legs, while someone else below the table extended her legs onto it. Thus, with a sheet over the mid-section, the legs could be moved independently of the torso. That night, too, a co-operative slaughterhouse provided animal intestines that were placed on the actress' stomach and 'removed' during the scene.

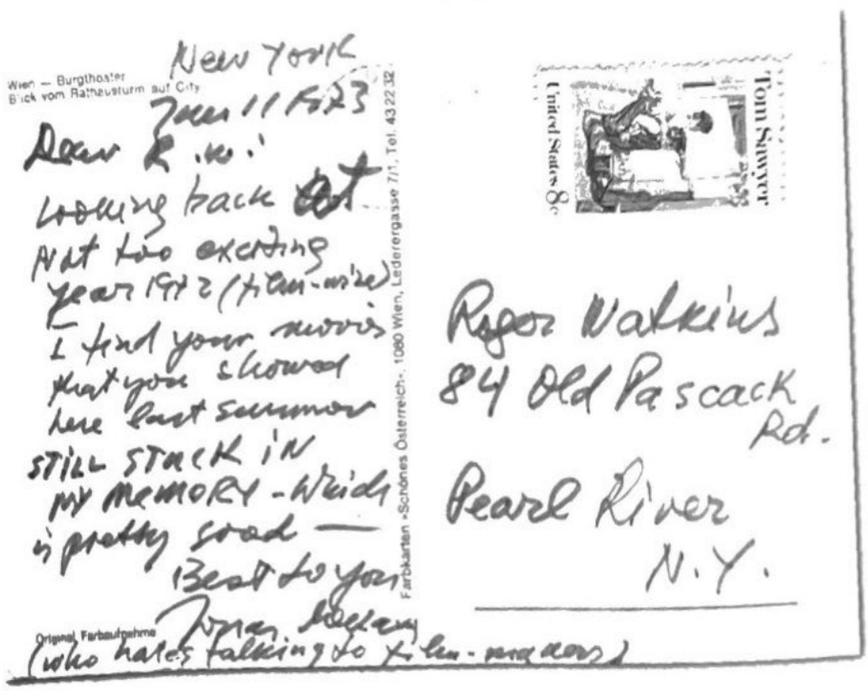
On January 17, the death of Palmer was filmed in what had once been the college radio station's studio. This scene typifies the circumstances of filming. Roger took advantage of whatever was available, so he used

this studio, and its large window prompted him to stage the action as if seen 'in' or 'on' a screen formed by that window's frame. To me, that made good visual sense, but it also made thematic sense because of the way films, filming, staging, and theatricality (along with various kinds of decadence and corruption) were intertwined in the film. Although Roger probably had the basic story in mind ahead of time, I'm quite sure he made much of it up as he went along, and when production was over I was impressed with how interesting and complex these elements were. (Much of that, of course, disappeared when the film was drastically shortened.)

I don't recall if Roger had initially thought about using masks, but I do remember that the masks seen in the film had been created for use on stage in a production of a Greek tragedy. They already existed and were available, so they were incorporated into the film — and became, I think, a very striking and memorable part of it. It is one thing to make use of whatever is available. It is something else to use it in meaningful ways that afterward seem inevitable.

Were you aware of Roger's incentive to make a completely uncompromising film, and the — now lost — footage he shot in a slaughterhouse and with which he intended to open the film?

One way of responding to this question is to say that the issue of 'compromise' never arose. When one decides to make a film about cutting up living people and filming it, and when one wants to get attention with that film, one simply does what the story calls for and shows what must be shown. The impact of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* can be felt here, for Roger was just doing what Romero did, only more so. At the same time, anyone who knew Roger knew that whatever he did would reflect his own personal intensity, his obsession with death and decay, and his somewhat off-beat sense of humour and hyperbole.



Postcard from filmmaker Jonas Mekas, 1973.

As for the slaughterhouse footage, I do not think I ever saw it. I do know I was not present when it was shot. My impression is that I considered the idea thematically appropriate, with the juxtaposition of one kind of slaughter with another. There certainly is respectable precedent, if one recalls the climax of Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* which, I have no doubt, inspired the climax of Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

I have two additional unrelated, memories to share.

KEITH NICHOLS

'I have only three real friends. Except for Jensen, whom I met when I was nineteen, they have been my friends since childhood. I can go without seeing any one of them for years at a time, meet them in a bar or anywhere else and pick up the conversation exactly where we left off the last time we saw each other. They are Paul Jensen, of course, Richie McNichol and Keith Nichols. Keith is a Doctor out of Syracuse University, The University of Chicago and Stanford (considered America's finest University the equivalent of your Oxford or Cambridge). Keith gave up psychiatry ("I had too many neurotic women spitting on me all day") and is presently a General Practitioner Of Medicine in the small town of Owego, in upstate New York... the place where we both went to High School. He skipped a grade. I got through by the skin of my teeth.

When we met he was fourteen and I was eighteen but he was smarter than anyone I knew at the time. Probably still is (except for Paul). He was also very funny and he used to advise me not to take drugs. I, of course, never listened, which is why I think, my IQ has backed off a few notches over the years.

We were in a band together. I used to have to drive him back and forth he being so young and all, to Ithaca, New York, where we practised and performed. Our biggest concert was at Cornell on New Year's Eve 1967–68 or 68–69 (those long ago drugs are showing their damage once again). At one point I recall Keith's playing as being absolutely inspired (he played keyboards) and turning around to watch him I couldn't help but notice he was half passed out on the floor his hand held high to the — for him invisible — keyboard playing most remarkably.

Keith Nichols has kept me healthy and what passes for sane for twenty years. He knows more about me than anyone... probably more than myself. At times in my life I've felt like I was Mr Hyde to his Dr Jekyll.

Twenty-eight-years-ago I premiered LAST HOUSE (the long cut of course and it wasn't the B&W dubbing print everyone else has seen. It was the colour workprint with splices intact) on my parent's living room wall. The "premier" audience was Keith Nichols, his wife (still), my wife (gone these fourteen years... not dead... just gone) and myself. They were the first to see it because I cared what Keith had to say.'

Email from Roger, Sept 4, 2001

One of the most vivid memories I have is filming a shot in which the character played by Roger kicks someone who is lying helpless on the floor ('Palmer,' I think). This particular shot showed Roger from head to waist, with his feet and the victim unseen below frame level. The camera was placed near the floor and angled up; I may have been operating the camera on this shot, but if not I was crouching near it, because I picture events from that angle. There was, of course, no one to be kicked. Roger talked calmly with the crew, setting up the shot. Then, when the camera was rolling, he abruptly launched into vicious action. Despite my clear grasp of the context I was completely convinced by his performance. Indeed, I was scared! Had my friend truly gone crazy all of a sudden? Then, when Roger felt the shot had lasted long enough, he stopped and calmly said to cut and asked how it looked. This shifting of gears was for me a vivid illustration of what acting can be, of the power of illusion, and of how hard it is to define what is 'real'.

The second memory relates to the shot in which a power drill bores into a character's eye. I was not present, but thanks to those who were there the filming of that shot became legendary within our little group. They had obtained, from the ever-helpful slaughterhouse, a cow's eye to use for this very tight close-up. They expected to have no trouble filming the shot, but instead they found that the cow's eye was so tough that the drill quite simply would not penetrate it. Instead, the eye kept bouncing away from the drill's bit. They tried and tried and they could not make it work! Finally, in desperation, someone punctured the eye with a hammer and nail and then, with this preparation, the drill finally did its job. I was glad I didn't happen to be present, yet I can't help but see this as a scene in some perverse farce.

When did you last view the film?

I believe I saw the original, long print once, but without sound. It was then known as *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell*. Otherwise, I think I have seen it only once, after it had become *Last House on Dead End Street*. It was shown as part of a double feature (with *The Hills Have Eyes*, I think) at a cheap and sleazy 42nd Street theatre in Manhattan. Roger and his wife and I and mine attended, uncertain if we would ever have another chance to see it in a theatre and joking beforehand about it being the 'premiere'. We were probably the only white people present and it was the first time I had been in an audience that talked to the screen quite so extensively. I don't think they liked the film, but I can not be sure. I do know that, whether they liked it or

The elusive Roger Watkins, 2000.

whether they hated it, when it was over we didn't want the audience to recognise Roger as that figure on the screen. It was so unusual an experience that I now remember the circumstances better than I do watching the film itself.

You also appeared in another of Roger's films, as a grandfather in *Amputee Grand Prix*. Can you tell us a little about this?

This was one of Roger's 'fun' shorts, some-

THE ASHES OF THE MOURNING SON

The Band was pretentiously called The Ashes Of The Mourning Son the sobriquet coming from the heady sixties and bands like The Strawberry Alarm Clock, The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band and... well... you get the picture. I didn't name the fucking thing and neither did Keith.

The singer: Me

The Concert: New Year's Eve 68–69. A Cornell Alumni Dance. I remember a girl I liked in High School was there. When I played bassoon in the orchestra she would point to the score whenever I got lost which was more often than not. She died of leukaemia a few years later and I still find myself thinking of her from time to time. A very nice person with a name that made me smile: Nancy Bean, she was. (I could play a mean saxophone though. When I was thirteen I was in a quartet with guys in their forties and beyond. One of them was named Lennie Course — who must have been seventy — and he spent his younger years arranging and playing piano for the likes of Lena Horn and Tommy Dorsey. He was also one of Keith Nichols' piano teachers.) Our greatest hit was 'Lullaby Of Birdland'.

The men for you: Keith and Ken. Two guys who know. Especially Keith. Here's how I started hanging out with him: The Nichols' had money but were in no way ostentatious. Very tasteful indeed, Behind their house was a swimming pool and next to the pool was a kind of cabana all screened in and comfy. I used to get loaded and late at night sneak into the cabana to sleep so I wouldn't have to hitchhike home. Quite early one morning I woke up and their was Keith sitting quietly alone. I thought "shit, I'm caught", but all Keith said was, "I don't know why you smoke marijuana... it'll just make you stupid". Then he got up and left never once telling his parents about their frequent boarder. Fucker was fourteen-years-old and I was fresh out of High School. (I'm proud to carry the scars from two generations of Dr Nichols'. Keith's father stitched up my arm and Keith my face.)

I wrote the part of Mr Mahler in HOBO FLATS for Keith who is a hell of an actor with no balls because if he had any balls he would have headed for Broadway instead of med school and would be famous today as one of our finest. Then he could raise money for my films.' **Email from Roger, Sept 5, 2001**

thing he made just because he loved making films. The opening scene was filmed on the balcony porch of the apartment where I lived at the time. I played the amputee grandfather who explains the situation on which the rest of the film is based. It was autumn and so I suggested that Roger sprinkle some fallen leaves on my head and shoulders, to suggest that I had been sitting there for some time and, being armless, was unable to brush them off.

spent part of a summer writing a screenplay together. The first, *A Heritage of Blood*, was inspired by the psychological thrillers made by Hammer Films — such as *Paranoiac* — and its title was more-or-less stolen from David Pirie's book, *A Heritage of Horror*. The second was called *Spittoon*.

I've never viewed myself as a potential filmmaker, but Roger thought I could bring something to these projects and I was glad to try. It was interesting and, often, fun to collaborate with him. For the most part, Roger provided the off-beat creative ideas and I helped give them structure. I was pleased with the results in each case.

ON THE DVD TRANSFER OF LHODES

'Went to Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago for the Barrel digital transfer of LAST HOUSE. Considering all that we had to work with was Mitch Davis' washed out 35mm print the results were miraculous. Because the distributors never bothered to create a colour corrected answer print the colours are at long last as they were meant to be... or very, very close.' **Email from Roger, June 3, 2001**

On another occasion, as an *homage* to Freddie Francis who was then filming *Tales from the Crypt*, we spent an afternoon shooting an 8mm version of one of that film's stories, entitled 'All Through the House'. Roger directed and I played the demented Santa Claus. I've always thought the film came out well and I sometimes showed it to my Basic Film Production class to illustrate how much could be done with little more than imagination. My students rarely recognised me as one of the characters.

Did you keep up with Roger's career beyond *Last House?*

As friends, Roger and I kept in contact, though sometimes sporadically. Twice we

Both scripts were filmed and I was present for part of the shooting each time. Unfortunately, the production and post-production circumstances were far from satisfactory and what might have been important stepping-stones in Roger's career led nowhere useful.

During the subsequent years, I have admired the films and careers of directors like Jim Jarmusch and David Lynch, but I could not help thinking that this man or that man had somehow 'stolen' the career Roger Watkins should have had. It is fascinating to think that *Last House on Dead End Street* was all the while accumulating a following, while we did not realise it. I am glad that Roger is at least now receiving some much-deserved attention and can't help but wonder if somehow this can return him to the path he once seemed to be following. After all, Luis Buñuel made *Un chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'or* and then went some fifteen years without directing another film and at least another ten before being noticed again. Anything is possible! ■

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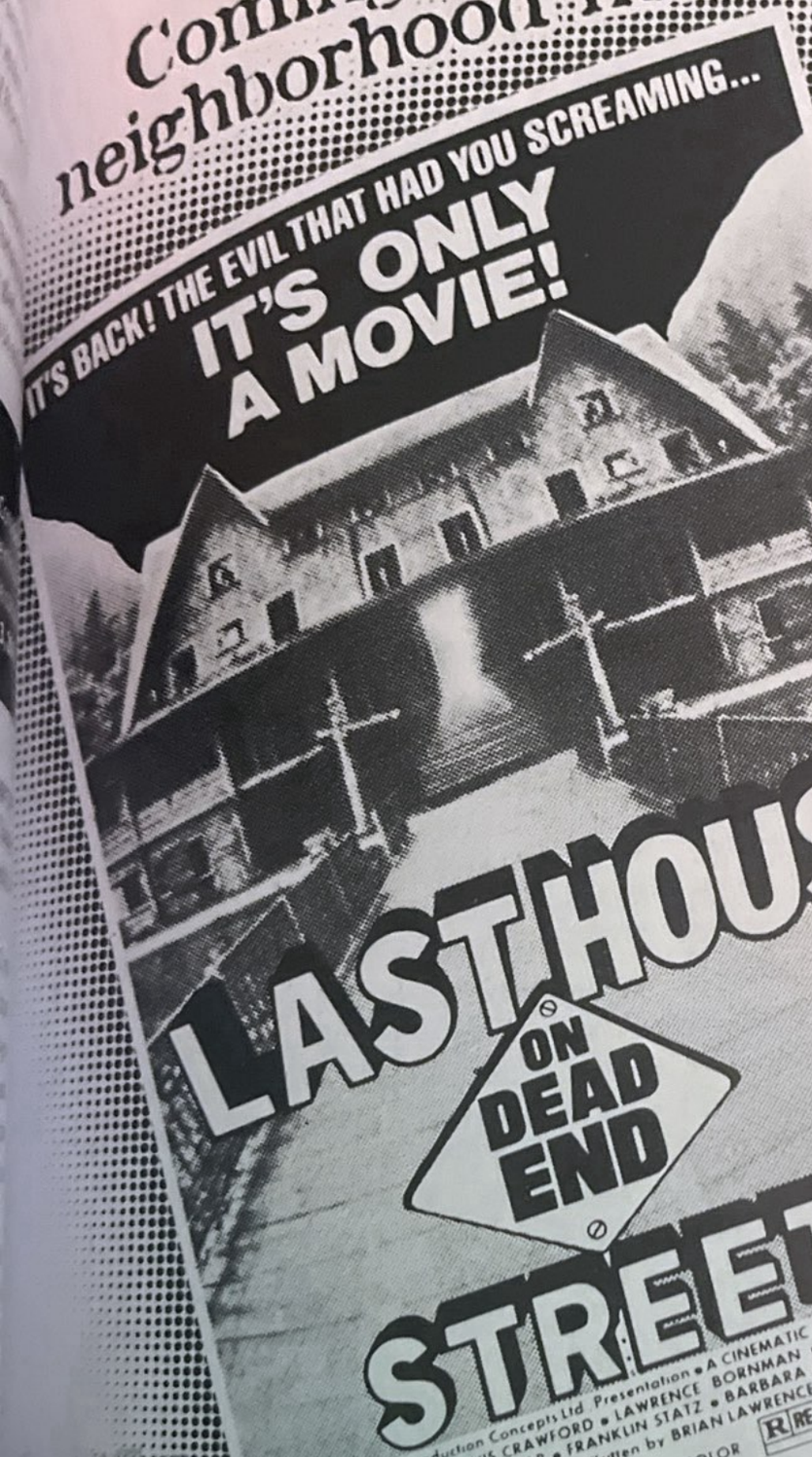
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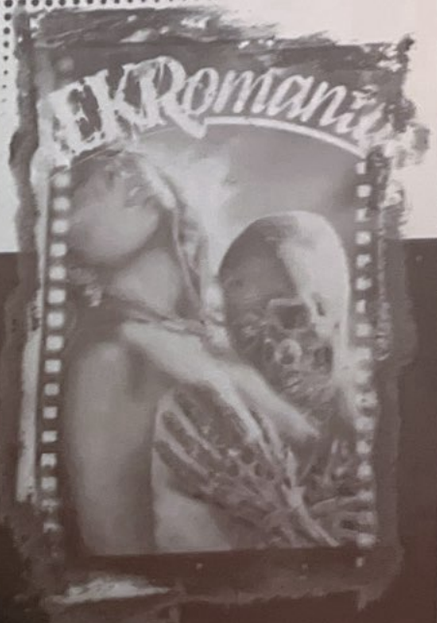

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Appointment with Fear
Meeting 'Terry Hawkins'

by David Kerekes

Today is Sunday. The weather reports state there's a blizzard coming in.

So far there has been light, intermittent snowfall, a drop in temperature, but nothing approximating a blizzard. It ought to be all over in a couple of days, state the reports.

From the hotel I call Roger Watkins. Although I'd travelled 6,000 miles or so to meet him, I still hadn't yet spoken to him in person. The telephone number he emailed me prior to my leaving for New York only ever gave me an answer machine, through which a soft, young female voice requested that I leave a message. I called a couple of times but left only one message which didn't get a reply. Was this the right number? I had no idea. Was the guy I had arranged to meet really the elusive director of *Last House on Dead Street*? I had no idea.

A disturbing low-budget horror movie made almost thirty years ago, *Last House on Dead End Street* is a film shrouded in absolute mystery. The credits on the picture are obviously fake, the subject matter of the film is shocking, the people in it don't appear to be actors, and the gore is sickening. Everyone involved in the making of *Last House on Dead End Street* disappeared, leaving behind no clue as to who they were, or from whence they came. And nobody was ever heard of again... until now. Corresponding with Roger Watkins shortly before my transatlantic trip, I made tentative plans for an interview. It was a gut instinct that brought me this far, but the further I travelled the more I began to think it could all a wild goose chase — or perhaps something even worse.

The arrangement was that I call him on Sunday evening. Sunday being now...

On the phone in my hotel room I punch in the number. Down the line I hear the other phone ringing — it could be the sound of a phone a hundred miles away or it could a phone in the next street. The purr of the dial tone doesn't give way to the recorded message this time, however, but instead a calm and well-spoken male voice. It has the gruffness of having smoked too many cigarettes.

I introduce myself and ask to speak with Roger.

"Hi, David," says the voice on the line. "This is Roger. Hey, I called you last night but the hotel said you'd checked out."

"Well, I'm still here," I reply. It is only later, after I put the phone down, that I wonder who Roger might have spoken to the previous night. It certainly wasn't me, and besides, he had no idea where I was staying; at no time had I given him the name or number of my hotel.

Perhaps it was a warning. Or a threat?

Roger tells he lives in a once grand mansion that has seen better days, a "squalorous hovel that needs repair". I contemplate

whether it might be the place that figures prominently in the movie — the ominous, overbearing building with the ornate carvings over which the *Last House* titles play.

The sound of car horns never fully subside in New York City. I hear them through my window — detached honking resonating through a backyard which stands empty but for a set of ladders against a wall. I feel the cold through the pane of glass. The radiator at my side is only partly warm — it has an air pocket that needs bleeding.

I arrange to meet Roger the following day: outside the train station in a place called Tarrytown, he tells me, which is located on the opposite side of the Hudson River.

Tarrytown — that sounds like a long way away.

March in New York City. I had landed at JFK airport a couple of days earlier — not because it was particularly convenient or closer to my hotel than landing at La Guardia, but because Kennedy airport was larger than life — I had to land there; romantic in that it was remote yet familiar.

Stepping off the plane and out of the airport doors, I was immediately bowdlerised by the sheer scale and dynamic of the place. It was big and it was busy. An officious looking man with a walkie-talkie asked if he could help me. Did I want a cab? "Yes," I replied. He signalled a younger colleague over who proceeded to lead the way. "This is a yellow cab, right?" I asked my fleeting escort, who nodded in the affirmative but said nothing.

Another officious looking man with a walkie-talkie said to me as I was passing him, "Be careful."

Travelling only in a licensed taxi is one of the prime rules of being careful in any country. Here in New York licensed cabs are yellow. My guide was taking me away from these and into one of the airport's dimly lit car parks. I kept hold of my luggage as he reached a car and flipped open the trunk. "Forget it," I said, turning back. "No, no, this is my cab," he called back, suddenly animated into a language that was barely English. "This is my cab," he repeated, patting the roof of a decidedly regular looking vehicle.

"It's not yellow, though," I observed.

Suddenly, as if the prospect of losing me — a customer — had sent a panic signal across the airwaves, another man appeared out of nowhere, insisting that I get into the car because I could "trust" him. It was such a stupid thing to say I almost hesitated. I could trust him and his cab was cheap. Needless to say I didn't take him up on his offer, but made my way back to the airport and got in line for the ceaseless procession of yellow cabs.

I was staying in a hotel on the Upper West Side, which got to be quite an irritation in that it was some distance away from all the other parts of town I intended to visit during my stay. However there was a lively bar a couple of blocks away, where I spent most of the first night downing beers. The jukebox played The Doors and mid seventies Rock music, perfectly suited to the clientele who looked like barflies and extras from *Dusk Till Dawn*.

(When I happened across the place some days later, I felt as though I had wandered into an episode of *Hammer House of Horror*, in that the jumping joint was no longer jumping, the jukebox was off and the formerly crowded bar was inhabited by a couple of old folk and a woman who was lost and wanted to call her husband. Gone was the voluptuous Hispanic bar girl, who managed to tease each and every one of the male customers into staying for just one more round. Now behind the bar was a gargantuan black guy who offered me a newspaper to read with my beer. I impressed him deeply when I said no thanks, I have a book.)

Showing me around New York on my first trip was friend and regular *Headpress* scribe Mikita Brottman, who was living not a million miles away and had kindly agreed to help me find my way to Tarrytown and Roger Watkins.

Being familiar with *Last House on Dead End Street* and the mystery surrounding its

production, Mikita was similarly eager to meet its director and not a little hesitant at the same time. Apprehensive that we might be falling prey to some elaborate hoax. I did nothing to allay Mikita's apprehension when I divulged my telephone conversation with Roger of the previous evening.

"He said he'd called the hotel and was told I'd checked out," I said.

"Are you sure you didn't give him the number of your hotel?" she asked.

"Positive. But even if I had, I certainly haven't checked out!"

"This is getting a little bit scary."

APPOINTMENT WITH FEAR

'Come to think of it you might prefer the train. It's as beautiful as the bus ride is ugly. It comes up the other side of the Hudson but I would be more than happy to pick you up at the station. Go to Grand Central Station in mid Manhattan. The information booth will supply you with the train times. Take the train to Tarrytown. Try not to make it before 1 pm. Also, Grand Central is my favourite building in NYC. Set aside some time to explore its recently rejuvenated magnificence.' **Email from Roger Watkins**

With it's dimmed lights and thick marble facade, Grand Central station has the resplendence of a large, popular museum. The commuters and visitors who pass through it do so with some respect and in hushed conversation. From atop the elegant stairway, looking out over the station, it's difficult to believe that outside its tranquil walls is the bustling metropolis of Manhattan.

At one of the desks we buy our round trip tickets to Tarrytown. The clerk tells us we need to catch the train on track twenty-one. Each of the numbered doorways around the building — of which there are over a hundred — leads to a separate track. Locating the doorway to track twenty-one and the train to Tarrytown, we pass through and down a slope to the platform, where a strange sight greets us: track twenty-one is boarded up! The train to Tarrytown has been X-ed from this world courtesy of two huge planks of wood nailed across the end of the line. I look at Mikita. First I've mysteriously checked out of my hotel, now the train has disappeared. If we were characters in a cheesy Amicus picture, this would be a portent of doom we would no doubt choose to ignore. But we're not and choose to ignore it anyway, having travelled too far to turn back now.

On the main concourse, we ask a porter which is the next train leaving for Tarrytown. "Track twenty-one," he says with bored assurance. "Track twenty-one is boarded over," we reply. "It is?"

This chafe in the schedule may well be the highlight of his day. With only moments to spare, the porter makes a call and is able to direct us to another track where a different train is destined to leave for Tarrytown. More than that — he takes us to the train.

The journey to Tarrytown lasts around thirty minutes, during the course of which we pass by aged tenements and the Hudson River, looking remarkably calm. I still can't believe there's a blizzard coming.

Tarrytown station isn't very big. There's a platform and a waiting room. But the snow here has settled and averages about a foot deep. We're far too early for our rendezvous with Roger, and so decide to take a look around. In either direction we can see only the vestiges of industry; there is a smell of gasoline hanging in the air. This is obviously not the place to come to idle away an hour or two.

We walk in the direction that appears to offer the highest likelihood of having a diner or a bar. But the nest of shops we had seen at a distance turns out to be a drive-through McDonald's, a dry cleaner, and a supermarket called Grand Budget — none of which appeals to us very much. There doesn't look to be any other place worth walking to, when Mikita suddenly spots a lighted neon sign. The sign is down a small road flanked by slatted wooden houses, all painted white except for one house which is painted blue, and posthumously festive with Christmas lights around its windows.

It's strange, but I don't think we have yet passed anyone on the streets of Tarrytown.

On the door of place with the neon light is a small plaque which reads, simply, 'T42 Club'. If this is a bar it is a rather unassuming one.

Knocking the snow from our shoes we go inside. At least it's warm. An elderly grizzled gent tends to a bar while a woman — we assume his wife — sits on a stool on the other side of it, flicking through the stations of a TV with a remote. It's 11:30 AM. No one else is in the place. We get ourselves a drink and retire to one of the booths. I'm amused by the many signs on the walls which herald St Patrick's Day, in particular one that reads: *'Order Your Corned Beef Sandwiches Now.'*

The woman with the remote pauses her channel hopping momentarily as a weather report announces that the blizzard is passing without too much incident. She exchanges some words with the old guy behind the bar.

A small group of young Hispanic men come in, set up a pool game and order a round of beer. I get a second shot of whiskey and for Mikita a G&T, starting to slip into that comfortable zone which makes the prospect of going out into the snow and trudging back to the train station particularly unappealing.

There is some confusion over the pool players' second round of drinks: they obviously want more beer, but the bartender has misunderstood their limited command of English and has instead lined up five large glasses of coke with ice. It's a comical situation, these chain smoking pool playing Latinos faced with unwanted soft drinks, but we don't think it wise to laugh too loud.

Another report on the TV gives a somewhat contradictory opinion on the state of the blizzard: the weather has taken a turn for the worse apparently, and people in some parts of the country are advised to take refuge in their storm bunkers.

It's time to head back to Tarrytown station for our rendezvous.

Whilst trying to decipher the timetable on a wall for trains back into New York City, idling away a little more time, a voice behind us calls my name.

We turn to greet a stocky middle-aged man with short cropped hair, whose face betrays that of someone inured to hardship and not likely to suffer fools lightly. He introduces himself as Roger, and the attractive young lady at his side as Suzanne.

I'm taken aback for a moment: my only image of Roger Watkins — the director and star of *Last House on Dead End Street* — is the twenty-something psychopath with shoulder length hair and leather jacket who commandeers his hippie associates into drug-fuelled atrocities. The Roger Watkins of nearly thirty years ago.

But it's definitely him, no doubt about it. His laugh confirms this fact — it's the same malevolent wheezing laugh which punctuates the film.

'TERRY HAWKINS' TODAY

'An American Heavy Metal band called The Forgotten have a new CD out, and on it they play the killing of Suzie scene in its entirety merely adding what I suppose is perceived to be a Heavy Metal chord or two at the very end. No money here for me (of course) but how can I resist? Anyway the band is giving a big concert here on Friday, opening the show with the scene from the movie. Of course they want me there... but let's face it, they think of 'Terry Hawkins' as being twenty-one, not fifty. I feel like Jack Kerouac when ON THE ROAD was published — everyone was looking for a twenty-year-old 'beatnik' and Jack was nearing forty, fat, dishevelled and drunk (though I am none of these things).' **Email from Roger Watkins**

Tarrytown is not a particularly big place, but the restaurant we find in which to eat and conduct the interview — the Horsefeathers — is located between two funeral homes. This I find amusing. And down the road is the cemetery where some scenes for Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* were filmed. Remote yet familiar.

The snow is falling more heavily. A blizzard is coming. ■

The following interview with **Roger Watkins** took place in March 2001, in the company of Roger's companion, **Suzanne Rowe**.
Asking the questions were **David Kerekes** and **Mikita Brottman**.

The text in the sidebars — unless stated otherwise — are from emails addressed to **David Kerekes**.

The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell

DAVID KEREKES: Can you tell us about your role in the film, *Last House on Dead End Street*?

ROGER WATKINS: Well it was entirely my creation. I wrote it, directed it, played 'Terry Hawkins', edited, synthesised the music... I just did everything except play all the parts.

DK: Who financed it?

RW: I borrowed $1,500 from my father and made a picture. It was low-budget. Actually the budget for the film was nothing. It was zero dollars. My friends were in it, I borrowed the lights and camera from a friend of mine who was teaching cinema — Paul Jensen. Do you know his books at all? He wrote *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*, *Boris Karloff and His Films*, *The Men Who Made the Monsters* and a new one on Hitchcock called *Hitchcock Becomes 'Hitchcock'*. He still teaches film.

DK: Did Jensen play the blind man?

RW: Yes, he did.

DK: And what did he think when he saw the film?

RW: I don't think anybody knew what to think. I think absolutely everybody just thought, "This will never come out. It's just insane, but let's do it." They were all friends of mine.

MIKITA BROTTMAN: Did you pay your loan back?

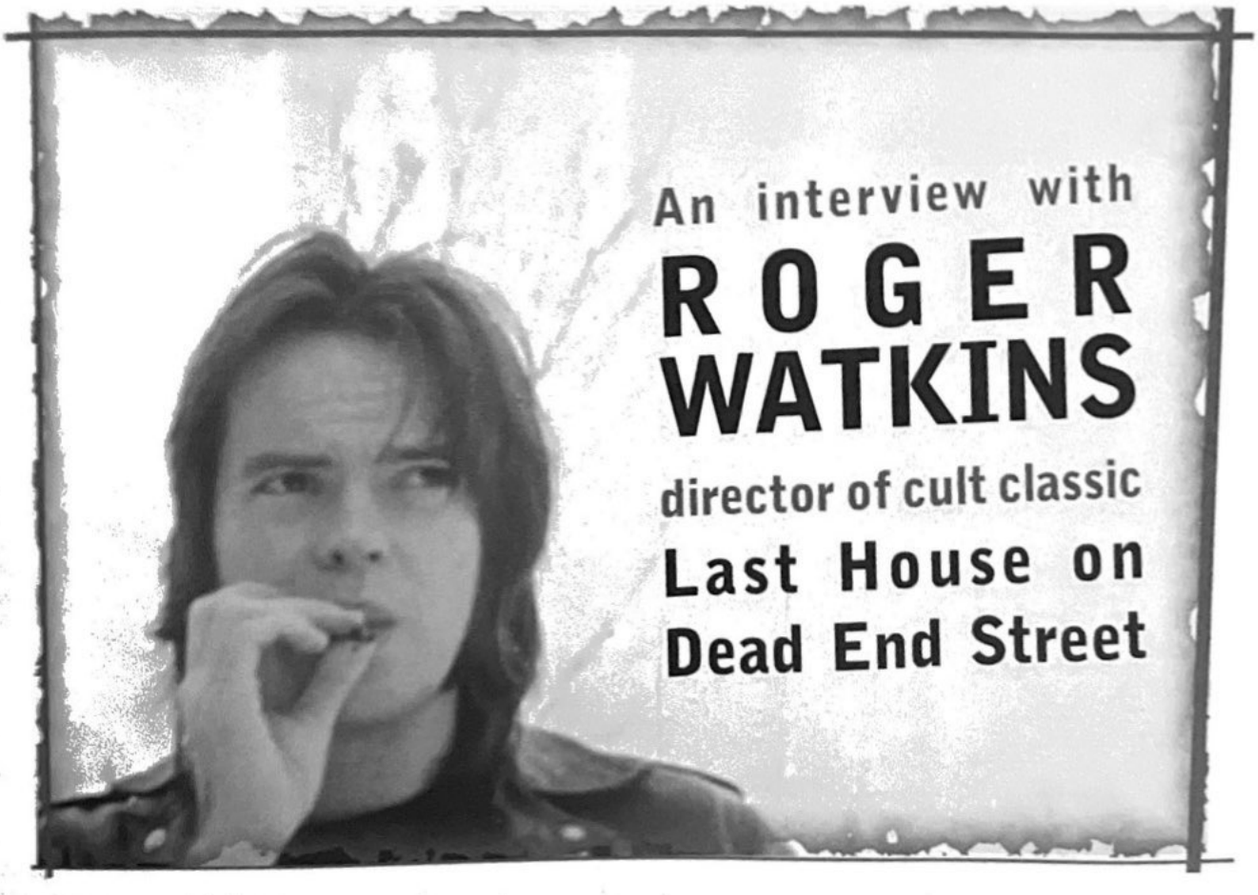
RW: Yes, I did. I borrowed another $1,500 and paid him back in thirty days [laughs].

DK: Did Ken improvise any dialogue?

RW: Oh yes. He and I wrote dialogue.

DK: Was the line "Tits like bananas and leather" — a sexual peccadillo of Ken's in the film — one of his?

RW: I'll tell you where that came from. My father before WWII was stationed in Hawaii and there were a lot of whorehouses around the barracks. I remember him telling me "God, I met this incredible whore and she had tits like bananas!" and I thought that was funny, so I told Ken to say it in the film. That comes right from my father's mouth.



An interview with ROGER WATKINS director of cult classic Last House on Dead End Street

DK: *Last House on Dead End Street* is rumoured to be an unfinished student film.

RW: It's finished and I was a year out of college when it was made. Ken Fisher, the guy who plays 'Ken', he was maybe twenty-six and was out of school, but all the other people were still undergraduates. Paul Jensen was teaching film, Steve Sweet was a student, 'Palmer' was played by a professor named Ed Pixley, which I'm wondering how he got into this thing [laughs]. It was very strange.

If it weren't for Ken Fisher, there would be no film because I was really strung out on amphetamine. I was just pouring it down and he would make sure I got up and got to where we were filming and he would prod me along and we would do this picture.

I'd say Fisher is the only one person in the film who had pretty much the same sensibilities that I had. He was also making films and 8mm stuff of his own. He's good.

DK: In what kind of environment was the film made? I mean, what kind of personal environment?

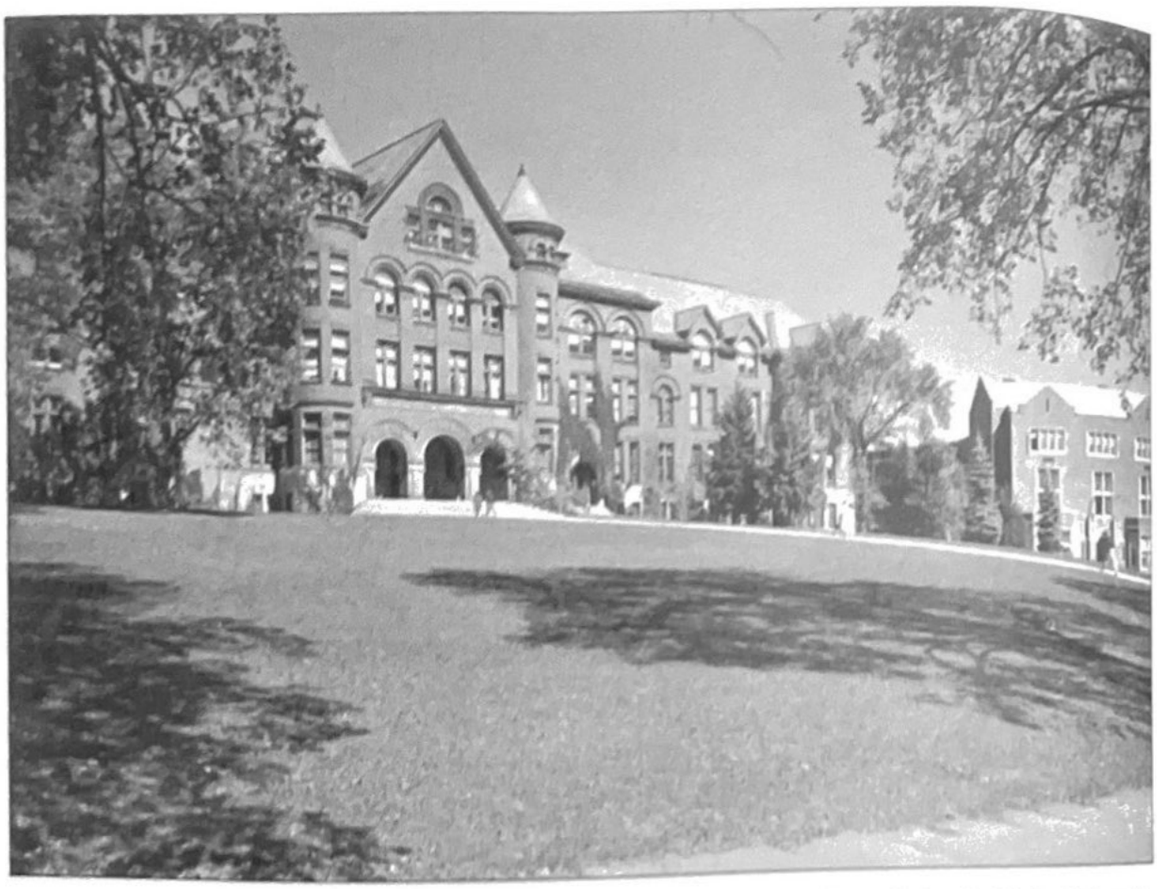
RW: Well, I'd just got married and I was living in a house in New York.
I never drink and make films, but back then I was doing a lot of speed whilst making this film. Things to me that just seemed sort of natural, that fall into place naturally within the film, somehow seem to oppress a lot of people. For instance, the scene in which the woman gets cut apart, I just thought, "Nothing seems wrong with this, it seems pretty natural."

MB: Do you think it was partly the influence of being on amphetamine that made the picture 'dangerous'?

RW: I'm not sure, because even the work I did before that would have this pretty shocking imagery. I've never thought about it — it just came to me. Everybody would say to me, "Rog, why are we doing this, we're not a bunch of Charlie Manson followers." They were just straight students who were nice and agreed to be in this film. I'm not sure they were offended. I think they were just incredulous that we were doing it, especially poor Ed Pixley who realised he was probably in for more than he bargained for.

DK: Did they get paid anything?

RW: Not a nickel. Nobody did. I just said, "If this movie ever comes out, we'll get paid." I don't know where any of them are now, except for Paul.



'Old Main' Administration Building and Bugbee School, State University College, Oneonta, New York — the building in which much of *Last House* was shot. Image taken from a picture postcard, date not known.

[Shortly after this interview was conducted, through often fortuitous circumstances, Roger did indeed hear from many of his old friends. He wrote to Kerekes in an email: "I knew it had to happen eventually. The cast begins to re-emerge after twen

years..." You can read interviews with several of them in this feature.]

DK: And nobody came after you saying, "This film has come out now!"?

RW: No. I didn't know it was out until a guy chased me down 9th Avenue in New York City and recognised me.

MB: Because of the film?

RW: Yeah, that's how I found out. You know the original title of the film was *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell*, which is a reference to...

MB: A Kurt Vonnegut story. 'Mother Night' isn't it?

RW: Is it? Great, I'm glad you told me that because people are always asking me. I thought it was 'Sirens of Titan', but that's good. 'Mother Night.' About the Nazi?

MB: Yeah, and the image is that it's a very ordered system but in a completely chaotic world. The cuckoo clock tells the right time, it works, it strikes, but it's in a completely chaotic environment.

RW: It was perfect, I thought at the time.

MB: Yes, it's a good title.

RW: Well, it's gone forever now.

DK: What experience did you have in film prior to *Last House on Dead End Street*?

RW: I started making films when I was ten, mainly because I was hypnotised by... Well, here's what happened. I liked films. The first movie I saw was *Tobor the Great* which my mother took me to see and I loved it. I was maybe four when I saw it.

When I was ten, there was this guy in my neighbourhood named Jim Brocious, who was just off the wall. He was incredibly insane but probably in a good way — very imaginative but nuts, couldn't pronounce his 'r's and just slacked out. One day, I was standing out on the porch when Jim comes up and says that he's got a new projector. I won't even try to imitate him! I made him into one of the heroes of the script I just gave you [*Hobo Flats*]. He's got a new projector and I didn't think much of that because I didn't think much of home movies, but he tells me it's 16mm and I should see this thing. So I go to his house and he's got this big black 16mm projector and a reel of film, *Felix the Cat*, a thirties cartoon. It's b&w but it's covered in either paint or nail polish, something red. And I'm fascinated it. The projector's got a crank so it can go fast and it can go slow, it can go forwards, it can go backwards, you can stop it... I realised later that what probably fascinated me the most was the manipulation of time. I'm not sure I was aware of it then,

His career begins. Roger in 1958.

however. We showed *Felix the Cat* probably twenty times and his mother threw me out of the house at around midnight. My birthday was just a couple of months away, so I got a little Kodak Brownie Funsaver and started making my own little 8mm movies. And that's how that started.

DK: Did you study film at college?

RW: No, I studied English Literature. I hate to sound egotistical but I was way beyond what everyone was doing at college, including the professors. Jensen will tell you that. No, I never took a film course, just film appreciation.
Actually I'm glad I went there, that's what enabled me to make *Last House on Dead End Street* — Jensen's film department.

MB: Does he still teach?

RW: Yes, he does.

DK: When you were making *Dead End Street*, did you have aspirations to release it theatrically?

RW: Yes, absolutely.

DK: Because it has some pretty extreme stuff in it for the time, such as the slaughterhouse scene.

RW: Do you know about the uncut slaughterhouse scenes?

DK: The film I've seen has got cattle being hung up and slaughtered...

RW: Right, well the original print of *Dead End Street — The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell*, whatever it is — the first twenty minutes took place in the slaughterhouse. It was just the most horrifying thing you ever saw, but it would have cutaways to where you see Terry Hawkins getting arrested in a projection booth in a porn theatre. Ken was supposedly

Photo courtesy Ken Fisher

An interview with KEN FISHER

Last House co-star and behind the scenes co-ordinator

DAVID KEREKES: Can you tell us about your role in the film *Last House on Dead Street*?

KEN FISHER: I play 'Ken' (!), Terry Hawkins' sidekick, who has a romantic yen for large mammals, and has spent a few years in the joint for seducing a calf or a goat, I forget which. Actually I came aboard wearing a couple of different hats. In

working in the slaughterhouse and that kind of tied the whole thing in. You would see these women — the rest of Terry's gang — pair up together after leaving home. So, you would have all the exposition in the first twenty minutes surrounded by the slaughterhouse footage.

Dead End Street was in complete linear time. There was originally no flashbacks, no flash-forwards, nothing. They had to do what they did because they cut so much out. You have to have these voiceovers filling in everything, which is ridiculous.

DK: It jars you because you're thinking, is this a flashback or a flash-forward? You've no angle on the film yet.

RW: Right. You know, I cut the film in a garage on a table like this, with hand wound rewinds. It was never projected at twenty-four frames per second. It was me trying to estimate twenty-four frames per second. I would have liked the chance to trim things here and there, which I never did. Nobody refined anything. People just got rid of things or took this sequence and put it here, which is absolutely stupid. The scene of me coming to that big old house was actually twenty-five minutes into the movie, in the real movie. I still have hopes of finding this footage by the way. I think it exists not far from where we are sitting right now, but I would probably have to have a lawyer to find it for me. I had this really pretentious idea that real

Roger (left) with 'Captain Jack', in a short film by Ken Fisher.

addition to playing the cow-hugging second banana, I operated the camera when I was not on screen, and since I'd done some stage lighting and made a few student films, I got drafted to handle the lighting for what was known then as *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell*. Courtesy of the college film club, we had an old Arri with a scratched lens and a half dozen small Lowell lights. Period. No scrims, gels, filters, reflectors, nets, silks, flags, cutters, cards, umbrellas — nothing. That simplified the lighting quite a bit.

Do you recall when you first met Roger and your impressions of him?

Roger and I were SUNY-Oneonta students, moving in the theatre/film/TV circles in the late sixties, early seventies. We both made a few student films, acted in stage productions, and generally played the role of Brooding Artist On Campus. Actually, Roger brooded. I more or less sulked. One of my short films featured Roger — I shot it for a play called *Captain Jack's Revenge* in which we both had parts. Roger was Oneonta's Orson Welles — a charismatic wild man who lived and breathed film, and was clearly destined for some sort of fame... We both graduated about the same time. I stuck around town. Roger left for a while, then reappeared with a carton of Ansco T-100 16mm reversal film, and an idea. "Hey, kids! Let's make a movie!"

Can you tell us about working on the *Last House* set, and the general commitment of those involved?

Most of the cast and crew were new to film, and even with all the usual delays and surprises, there was generally a feeling of pulling together to make it work. The project had generated a lot of interest among the local theatre folk, and in addition to lending us

Terry Hawkins surrounded by his (masked) acolytes.

the Arri and the lights, several of the theatre faculty and staff appeared in the film and helped us out with props and special effects — such as the masks and the branding iron. As the nature of the film became more apparent, some of the actors, particularly the women, began to question their initial enthusiasm. Roger shifted into coax/cajole/persuade mode and kept almost everyone aboard. In general, whatever problems the actors had were solved privately, and I don't recall much balky behaviour on the set.

A year or so earlier I had read an article by Kenneth Tynan called 'The Polish Imposition', about Roman Polanski and his knack for imposing his will on actors and getting them to do things for the camera that they wouldn't normally do for any price. That was Roger. He could talk anybody into anything. The only exception was Steve, who absolutely positively would not do to that deer hoof what Roger wanted him to do. In the movie, Steve never actually felates the hoof — they're trying to force it on him and he successfully resists. Roger wanted a... total involvement... but Steve would have none of it. [*He does actually felate the hoof in the movie.*]

You were out of school and a little older than many of the other people in the film. Did this have any bearing on the others?

It wasn't something I thought about at all, but I can't speak for the others. I was twenty-five and most of the cast clocked in at about twenty-two, so it wasn't that big a gap, though I suppose it seemed bigger then than now. Besides, there were several professors in the cast, so I wasn't the old man of the group.

On trying to organise the shoot, Roger has said that "Everyday would fall apart; everyday would turn to shit". Is that how you recall it?

violence — which is what the slaughterhouse footage was — when you are in the slaughterhouse, when you actually go there it becomes so abstract. Just the repetition of it and the way you follow this living beast... oh man... being turned into nothingness. I thought this is great, this will anaesthetise people to violence. That's what I thought, that was my idea. But I was on drugs, so what do I know?

DK: You claim you made the film for $3,000 and that you only spent $800 on the film itself...

RW: I think that was to buy drugs. I didn't spend anything on that film. Nothing. There was not a dollar spent on it.

MB: Did you use film school equipment?

RW: Yes, an Arrifles-S camera, obviously with no sound; I tape-recorded everything on a thing this big [*indicates box of diminutive size*].

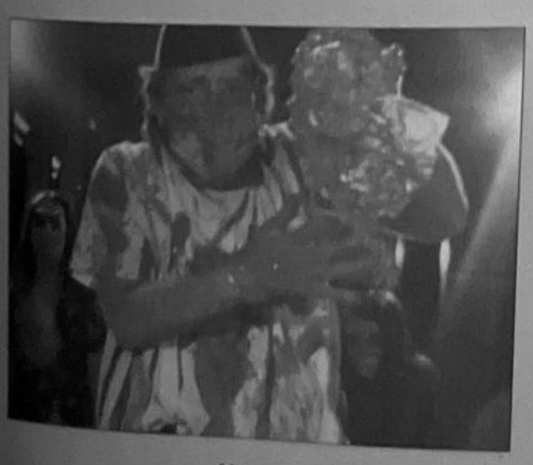
DK: How long did it take to film?

RW: I started filming in the week before Christmas of 1972. There was a Christmas break and I probably finished it the second week of January. It didn't take long. Every one of the murders was filmed in one night, or an afternoon and a night, so yeah, it was quick.

DK: You mentioned you shot on 16mm Ansco Color, what are the pros and cons with that?

RW: Well first it was free, that was the main pro — my father got it me for free plus the processing, plus the printing. The other thing I liked about it was that it didn't look like Kodak film; it looked 'other-worldly'. When I shot other films after *Dead End Street* I would always shoot on AGFA because it looked different. I don't like Eastman so much. Anyway that was the pro.
The con is that it didn't have the latitude that

It certainly describes the first few days of the shoot. We were using a brand-new unoccupied college dorm — a monumentally ugly concrete pile that looked more like a penitentiary than a dormitory. And that's exactly what we made it — the prison where Terry and Ken plot their evil deeds.
It had these long curving white corridors with floor-to-ceiling windows, so we found a wheelchair somewhere and spent the first hours of our first day shooting a series of tracking shots of Terry striding down the halls. As he did throughout the shoot, Roger reserved to himself the task of taking the light reading and setting the lens aperture.
We all looked forward to seeing the rushes from the first day's work, but Roger kept putting it off and making excuse after excuse, until finally he admitted that the whole first reel was nearly black and, of course, unusable. By then we had shot a few reels that turned out fine, so we didn't fret too much. But afterwards Roger was deathly afraid of underexposure, and tended to give a scene more light than it needed. So much footage was overexposed — and since we were shooting on reversal stock, this became a real problem when it came time for duping and striking prints.
Roger took care to run a steady ship and in-



Ken gets up to bloody mischief in *Last House.*

WATKINS

Eastman would have. It was a 64 ASA film, so when you filtered it you were down to like 20 and all we had was like eight lamps. That was the downside, but somehow I think it contributed to the film.

DK: The print I've seen of *Dead End Street* has the credit 'Today Productions Inc. 1977'.

RW: That's something the producers drew up.

DK: That's nothing to do with you?

RW: The film was made in 1973, cut in 73... actually there are newspaper articles about it written in 73.
I got involved with a lawsuit, do you know about that?

DK: McGraw?

RW: Barbara McGraw. So, the film was in the courts until 1976, I would guess.

MB: What was behind the court case?

RW: Well, in the original film, Terry Hawkins starts out as a pornographer. He's watching this stuff all day in projection booths, that's how he fits in with all these people. There's a lot more pornography going on. One of the scenes I filmed was with this girl, Barbara McGraw, who soon after decided she wanted to become a Broadway star and got it into her head that she didn't want to be in this movie anymore. So I gave her the film back, I really did. Of course I did make a copy of it — you can print that. It was nothing really, just R-rated stuff. So her and this lawyer drop a suit on me even after I give it back, which was totally inappropriate. I had lived up to my end of the deal. They sue me and I'm like twenty-three-years-old. It turns out to be very troublesome. I was fortunate enough to meet this great man quite by accident, named Isadore Cohen, who was a bril-

Continued from p.98

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sulate the rest of us from these calamities. For the most part he kept his demons to himself, and except for one or two eruptions — one directed at me, which I will remember always — he appeared focused and disciplined. If he did feel that everything was falling apart and turning to shit, he hid it well. Steve and I got an inkling of Roger's private frustration when we moved into his apartment after the shoot and discovered a variety of fist-sized holes punched in the wall.

Tell us more about Roger's 'eruption'.

It happened the day we gathered at the old ruined railroad roundhouse to shoot the strangulation of the caretaker.
Since I was principal camera operator and lighting technician, Roger and I generally began the day by discussing the set-ups he wanted and the overall feel he was looking for. I would make a few suggestions and Roger would accept or reject them. I didn't get all weepy when my ideas didn't fly — it was Roger's show and he was always candid about what he liked and didn't like.
Before setting up for the big interior scene, he wanted to do a couple of quick exterior grab shots of Terry ritualistically placing the masks on the two girls. It was a no-brainer — hand-held, no lights — we could do it in five minutes. But for whatever reason, I obsessed on some detail of the shot I wanted to fix — I have no idea what it was — but Roger wasn't a bit interested. And I pushed it. And Roger just wanted to shoot the damned thing. And I pushed it. And Roger said let's do it. And I pushed it. And the dam burst, and demons poured forth.
In a split second — and I mean a split-second — Roger turned a deep purple-crimson, and his face contorted into something resembling the Greek mask he wears in the movie. He started vibrating faster than you'd guess

Continued on p.99

McGraw Vs. Watkins Case Summary:
Barbara McGraw, Respondent, v. Roger Watkins, Appellant
Supreme Court of New York, Appellate Division, Third Department
October 16, 1975

PRIOR HISTORY: Appeal from an order of the Supreme Court at Special Term, entered February 13, 1974 in Otsego County, which denied defendant's motion for summary judgment dismissing the complaint.

DISPOSITION: Order reversed, on the law, and complaint dismissed, without costs.

OPINION: Plaintiff asserts two causes of action in her amended complaint, seeking an injunction and damages for invasion of her right to privacy in violation of sections 50 and 51 of the Civil Rights Law and for libel. Both are founded essentially on the same facts. For her first cause of action plaintiff alleges, in substance, that she agreed to pose in the nude for a movie defendant intended to produce on his representation that the movie had an artistic plot and defendant needed nude scenes to lend artistic credence to such plot. She executed a release valid against any claims she might have under sections 50 and 51 of the Civil Rights Law. Shortly after the scenes were filmed plaintiff changed her mind and obtained an agreement in writing from defendant voiding such release and he stated he would not utilize, publish or exhibit the photographed poses of plaintiff in his film, nor show them to any other person. The complaint further alleges that defendant thereafter included a nude scene of plaintiff in said film and has publicized and exhibited such film to many people known to plaintiff and others, all to plaintiff's shame, disgrace and embarrassment; and that he has also shown "other poses of the plaintiff" not included in the film to many people, all to plaintiff's shame and ridicule. It is further alleged that the film is a movie of little plot, and nothing more than a series of scenes depicting pornography, obscenity and violence; that the purpose of producing it was to enhance the financial interest of defendant and that defendant intends to exhibit the film at the film festival at Cannes, France, in the hope of obtaining financial backing for its production throughout the United States and Europe. For her second cause of action, plaintiff repeats several of the above allegations and further alleges that the use by defendant of plaintiff's photographs has caused her to be shamed and held up to ridicule in the community and that defendant has continued to and still does use and exhibit said photographed scenes of plaintiff, all to plaintiff's damage. On this record it is apparent that plaintiff has failed to make a case against defendant, either on her action under sections 50 and 51 of the Civil Rights Law or on her action for libel. We are not here concerned with whatever other cause of action plaintiff may have. Section 51 of the Civil Rights Law provides that injunctive relief and damages may be recovered by "Any person whose name, portrait or picture is used for advertising purposes or for the purposes of trade without consent". A finding that plaintiff's picture was used for "advertising purposes or for the purposes of trade" is essential to a determination that her right of privacy has been violated. From an examination of the pleadings and the moving papers, we can find no such claim. More specifically it is significant that there is no allegation that defendant made a charge for any of the alleged exhibitions of the film. In our view, the alleged use of plaintiff's picture by defendant was not for advertising purposes or for the purposes of trade and, therefore, it is not within the statute's prohibitive provisions. Since the statute is in derogation of the common law, it must be strictly construed. The manner in which plaintiff has pleaded the libel is most inarticulate and equivocal. Since no special damage is pleaded, she can maintain her action for libel only by establishing that the exhibition of the photographs was libelous per se. In our opinion, a film strip which includes a scene of plaintiff posing in the nude does not necessarily impute unchastity to plaintiff and, therefore, the exhibition thereof by defendant was not libelous per se. As a matter of law, the complaint must be dismissed and summary judgment granted to defendant.

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liant, brilliant, brilliant, man. I had no money or anything but he took this case and it went right to the New York State Supreme Court where we won it. But if he had not have taken it I could have been in a world of trouble with the film. [See next page.]

DK: Is the sequence with Barbara McGraw in the finished film?

RW: No, it never was.

MB: Did she become a Broadway star, then?

RW: She never had a chance.

DK: A lot of nihilism runs through films of the late sixties and early seventies. What films were you influenced by whilst making *Dead End Street*?

RW: Look, I've got $800 here, I'm not going to make *Ben Hur* — well, I wouldn't want to make *Ben Hur* — and so I'm not going to be able to make something that's going to be in theatres unless I can totally shock people, and that's what I'm going to do. I can't compete with anything else and besides I knew I could do it.

You have to understand that the scariest film of all time to me is Orson Welles' *The Trial*. I think that's the most horrifying film ever made, not *Last House on Dead End Street*, not any splatter film. I was heavily influenced by *Un Chien Andolou*, by the fact that it could shock and still does.

DK: Monte Hellman?

RW: Well I don't consider him that shocking do you?

DK: No, but nihilistic.

RW: *Two Lane Blacktop*? I just saw that for the first time about six months ago. I was so happy to find it. Did you know, when that

WATKINS

Continued from p.96

a person could. Roaring something to the effect of GODDAMIT FISHER WHY CAN'T YOU JUST SHOOT THE FUCKING THING? He stormed off. Thirty seconds later the cloudburst had passed, Roger apologised, and we got on with business. For a while afterwards, I tended to keep my bright ideas to myself. Later, when we shot the mock-play scene in the old WONY studios, where Terry stomps the bejeezus out of Palmer ("I'm directing this moooovieeeee!"), I was reminded of the roundhouse eruption.

Roger makes no secret that the inspiration for the film was Ed Sanders' book *The Family*. Had you read the book yourself prior to filming? Were you conscious of a Manson-influence on the film?

I hadn't read the book. I think we all must have been aware of a Manson influence — it was hard to miss, though I don't recall anyone ever talking about it. I didn't look to the Manson story for guidance — I don't think my character had any equivalent in the Manson gang.

I don't think the Manson murders affected me in any unusual way, except as a particularly grisly crime story. That was also the summer of the moon landing, Woodstock and Chappaquidick, so there were plenty of gripping news stories to compete for attention. One heavy influence on me, and I think Roger too, was *A Clockwork Orange*, which had been out for about a year, and which we'd both seen numerous times.

If not for you the film wouldn't have been made, because Roger was so strung out. Can you give us an example of how strung out he was, and how you would motivate him?

Roger's true mental/spiritual condition was

FISHER

film came out *Esquire* magazine actually devoted an entire issue to the screenplay, which was unprecedented. I really wanted to see it after that. I did see it and did like it quite a bit.

So we are not talking horror here, we are talking nihilism? Well, I was impressed by the great nihilist Turgenev which is really the beginning of nihilism... and I like the word [laughs]!

MB: And Kafka as well. Did you enjoy *The Trial*?

RW: Absolutely, Kafka.

DK: Would have been aware of *Deep Throat* at the time you making *Last House on Dead End Street*?

RW: I think that came out after my film was made, as I recall.

DK: When I found out that *Dead End Street* was actually made in 1973 — as opposed to 1977, which is the common assumption — I thought that it had to be a 'reaction' to *Deep Throat*, particularly given dialogue like "Nobody's interested in sex anymore".

RW: No, no, *Deep Throat* came after. I know it did.

DK: 1973 would also put your film before Allan Shackleton's *Snuff*.

RW: I never knew of Roberta and Michael Findlay [the couple who made *Slaughter*, the film which Allan Shackleton would later exploit and ultimately release as *Snuff*]. Actually I think they made their film in 1972, her and her husband. Do you know how her husband Michael died?

MB: Decapitated by a helicopter blade.

RW: It's so funny. I think that is hilarious.

known only to him and to his wife Marcy, who surely earned her sainthood during the *Last House* shoot. We didn't know this at the time, but it's quite common for film directors to get deathly ill and/or nuts and/or catatonic when facing the necessity of walking onto a set full of actors and crew and convincing them you have the slightest idea of what you want.

I got in the habit of dropping over Roger's place not too early in the morning, pretending I didn't notice how frazzled he was, and drawing him into a conversation about things that needed attention — props to be begged or borrowed, actors to be soothed, locations to be scouted, and so on.

Dealing with concrete details usually cleared the cobwebs.

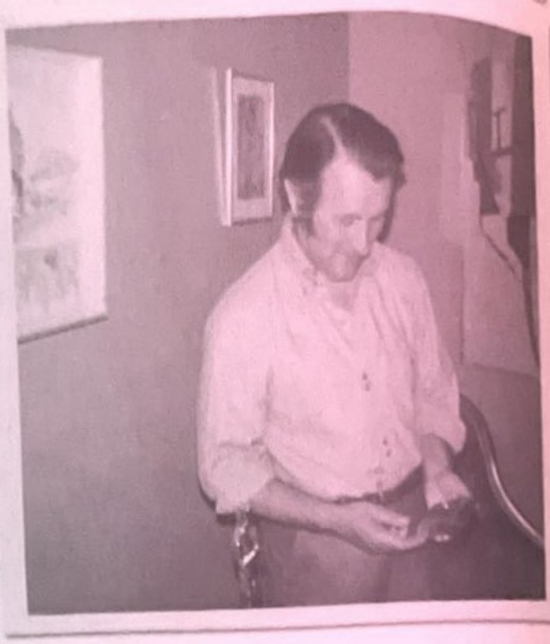
None of this was necessary on days when there were rushes to view. Roger would pick reels that turned out especially well, and we would gather in his living room and project them on the wall. Sometimes we'd have some guests unconnected with the production, and it amused us to hear their gasps at some of the more violent material. The cast and crew would be laughing merrily, while the guests were retching. We loved it.

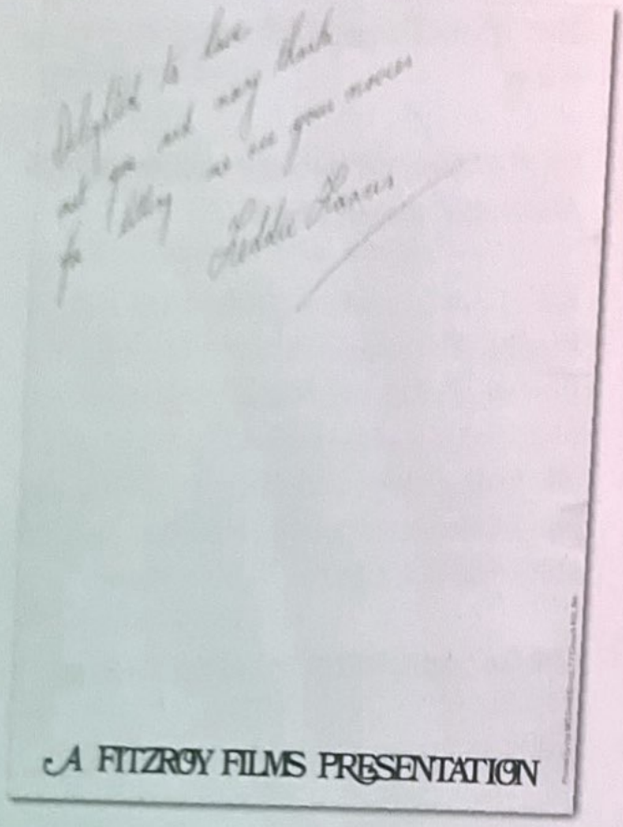
The projector — borrowed, of course, from the college — came with an extra anamorphic lens, which would stretch the image out to Cinemascope proportions. We'd use it sometimes with the rushes, just for a change of pace. Believe me when I say that watching the operating-room sequence from *Last House*, first generation, in 'scope, is an experience that sticks to your ribs.

Do you recall the 'real' Palmer, after whom the character in the film is named, who upset Roger a little? What was behind that?

I remember Palmer vaguely as a pretentious load who applied for grants to make artsy

Roger makes an impromptu call on Freddie Francis in 1970.
Clockwise from top right:
"Freddie's house, my bag."
Freddie at home with his Oscar.
Note from Freddie to Roger.





films that you couldn't pay people to watch. You know the sort of thing — twenty minutes of a spider crawling across a clock, or some such. His grant proposals sounded like a French critic on crack… but they impressed the local arts gentry. Roger hated Palmer enough to name the film's ineffectual pornographer after him.

One of my favourite scenes in *Last House* is where you and two girls are dancing — *'acting'* — in the courtyard, twirling around and stuff. Do you remember that day?

I remember it well, as I remember the earlier more compact version of myself that could fling around a full-grown woman with such effortless abandon.

The day we shot that in an alcove behind Old Main we ran afoul of the janitor — who was a couple of F-16s short of a squadron and had been assigned to work alone in abandoned, empty Old Main, where he couldn't pester people. Well, he pestered us. While we were setting up, he came charging out the door all a-twitter, sputtering something about perverts and bathrooms.

It turned out that one of the frosted basement-level windows was the window of the girls' powder room, and he thought we were setting up the camera to film the goings-on therein. Roger was inclined just to shoot the guy (not with the camera) and get on with our work. Luckily, the actor playing Palmer [Ed Pixley], a theatre professor, convinced the fellow that this was a faculty-supervised project with no low intentions concerning the ladies' room. The loony-tune wandered off muttering to himself. I thought we should have put him in the movie.

You have some of the best dialogue in the movie: Can you explain how some of it came about? Did you have a script or did

Continued from p.99

MB: They should have got that on film.

RW: God, that was funny. On top of the Pan-Am building in New York, that's where it happened. I actually wrote a film for Roberta. Roberta was great. I liked Roberta. They did that crummy film in Argentina or something... I went to see it because the guys who were distributing *Dead End Street* wanted to know if they had any competition. So I went to see *Snuff*. That murder scene that was tacked on the ending...!?

MB: It's ridiculous.

RW: Just a stupid-ass piece of shit, really. But yeah, *Dead End Street* was way before that. Anyway, Roberta... After *Dead End Street* I made a second horror film, which doesn't even bear talking about. It was 1979. My wife was pregnant, we were living in Brooklyn, I didn't have much money and this friend of mine called Danny Canton — who was assistant cameraman on the second horror film and was doing a lot of porn — one day says to me: "Listen, I've got to go and collect some money from this guy, Dave Derby." So, we go over there and it's just a big lark for me. I mean it's hilarious — naked women running around, everybody's snorting cocaine and blah, blah, blah. So I'm talking to this guy Derby and Danny says, "Roger just directed this film." Derby goes,

FRANCIS, LEE & CUSHING

'My good friend Paul Jensen had Freddie Francis' address since he had interviewed him for VARIETY. When I went to England in the summer of 1970, I went unannounced to Freddie's door. He was kind enough to not only let me in, but to view my films (RON RICO and REQUIEM). I later met Christopher Lee whilst he was filming SCARS OF DRACULA. When I went back to England in January of 1972, Freddie was directing THE CREEPING FLESH for Amicus, which is how I met Peter Cushing.'

Email from Roger, Jan 12, 2002

you ad-lib?

My dialogue all came as a surprise to me when I first saw the film. We shot MOS (without synch-sound), though we recorded wild sound on a portable tape deck for the important dialogue scenes. I may be misremembering, but I don't ever recall seeing a script or even a few pages of script — my dialogue was improvised entirely from Roger's general outlines. We shot a number of other dialogue scenes — mostly character material with the women as I recall — that didn't make it to the release cut.

A year or so after the shoot most of the principal players gathered in Princeton NJ, where Roger had arranged for a weekend dialog-looping session. We spent long hours trying to record dialogue to match the wild sound track. Roger had invited a playwright friend of ours to provide some respectable ad hoc dialogue, but not much of his output was used.

FROM KEN TO ROGER

'The last time we all spoke, twenty-eight years or minutes ago, we were twenty-somethings dabbling in the cinema of outrageousness. (Well, okay, you weren't dabbling, the rest of us were dabbling.) I wish someone had mentioned to me at twenty-five that I wouldn't be any smarter at fifty. It was quite a miserable surprise.

'When I moved back to Oneonta in 1988, I asked Paul [Jensen] about The Mooo-vaayy, and he gave me the name of some cult catalogue in Tennessee. For $20 I got the single worst print of anything I've ever seen anywhere — an overexposed dupe of a dupe of a dupe that wouldn't track in any VCR in the solar system. It was mesmerising to see the damn thing at last, but as off-the-cuff as our lighting and shooting had necessarily been, I knew it didn't look that bad.'

Email from Ken Fisher to Roger, June 13, 2001

"Yeah? You wanna do some porn?" And I say, "I'll do anything for the money right now. I don't care what it is but I'm not directing sex scenes. I refuse to tell people how to fuck." He goes, "Alright, I'll do that shit." [laughs]

So I made this film called *Her Name Was Lisa*, which I thought was pretty perverse because Derby had a daughter named Lisa. He says to me, "I have this daughter. I see a film that opens up with this girl called Lisa in a coffin, and I want to see how she gets there." That was what he wanted to do. So I wrote this thing, which took about two hours — because how much dialogue can there be in a porn film? I remember he paid me $2,500 and I thought "God, this is great!" Then he lost the script, which I hadn't typed — it was just longhand. He called me up and I just wrote it again, and he gave me another $1,000! [laughs]

I made *Her Name Was Lisa*, and all of a sudden it was like the hottest piece of pornography to come out of New York in decades. I didn't know why because I didn't know the genre that well. Everybody in New York wanted me to write their films. There is a photograph somewhere that Paul Jensen took of me standing on 42nd Street, where both *Dead End Street* and *Her Name Was Lisa* are playing.

This is the thing that I'll never forget: I meet Roberta and she was partner to this guy called Walter Sears. Walter Sears made tubas and was also in the porn industry. Him and Roberta wanted me to write a film, so I said okay. What I did was take Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and turned it into an old lesbian fashion photographer, dying of cancer, who falls in love with this young woman — she can't be pubescent like in the book. I gave this script to them, they read it and said, "This is really great, Roger. This is really great, but can we ask you something? Rather than have the old lesbian be a fashion photographer, could we have her be a tuba player?" [laughs] And they were absolutely serious! I said, "You can do whatever you like,

All in vain, as it turned out — the distributor discarded our work and re-recorded the whole thing with a different cast.

You say "Daddio" an awful lot in the film!

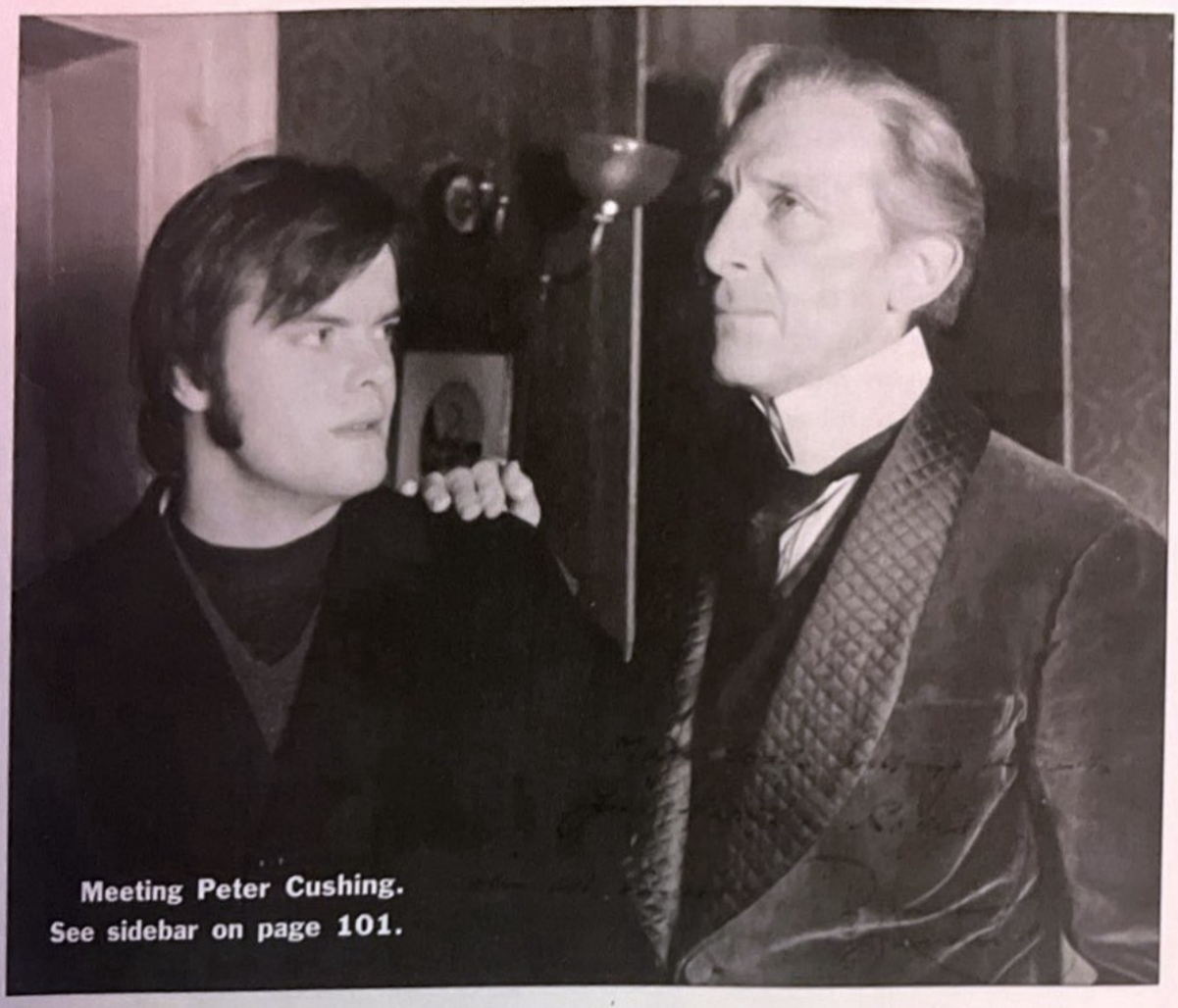
I don't recall the "daddios" — that may have been added by the actor who dubbed my voice. Except for the rejected dialogue track, I had no connection with post-production.

Were you aware of Roger's incentive to make a completely uncompromising film, and the — now lost — footage shot in a slaughterhouse with which he had originally intended to open the film?

There was always an aura about Roger that despite the absence of money and the near absence of equipment, he was somehow making exactly the film he wanted to make. Watching the silent three-hour b&w rough cut bore that out — it was a remarkable, exhausting trip through Roger's psyche. Even the truncated release version seems to me, as far as it goes, to be true to his intent, though Roger may quarrel with that.

It's a pity more of the slaughterhouse footage didn't survive. That was another day I'll never forget, try as I might. It was a bright, crisp winter morning, and walking into that slaughterhouse was like walking through the gates of Hell. Roger took a few shots of me in a smock and helmet, hanging around the stall where the next terrified cow awaited destiny. I took the camera and we slogged around ankle-deep in blood and goop, looking for fresh horrors. Roger had told them we were agriculture students from Cornell, working on a class project.

I grabbed a shot of a Camel-smoking slaughterman stunning old Elsie with a bolt-gun, hanging her up by her hind legs, slicing open her neck, reaching in and cutting her



Meeting Peter Cushing.
See sidebar on page 101.

jugular. Since the old gal was still alive, she pumped herself empty. Out it poured, splatting on the floor and steaming. A cow holds an astonishing amount of blood.

After that it was a bovine assembly line. Each carcass would clatter around on an overhead rail, and at each station somebody would help dismantle it in his assigned way. One guy chainsawed the head off. The next guy used a sort of hydraulic bolt-cutter to lop off the front legs. Then a guy would open its belly and dump the guts into a stainless steel wagon, which was wheeled off into another room where we were not tempted to go. The guts-guy whistled to get our attention, and held up a big bloody sac from among the guts. He slit it open and out fell a half-term calf. Another guy's job was to take the head apart piece by piece. He had a fifty-five gallon drum about half full of eyes. He gestured "take all you want", so Roger found a tin cooking pot somewhere and filled it with cow eyes.

The tin pot was on the back seat as we drove home later that day. We picked up a young hitchhiker who climbed into the back. After a while, Roger turned to me with the distinctive satanic gleam that always meant something evil was about to happen.

"How's lunch?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"How's... our... lunch... doing?" he repeated slowly.

"Oh. OH!" I turned to our passenger.

"Would you check our lunch?" I asked reasonably, indicating the tin pot.

The poor sap looked puzzled, but obligingly reached over and took the lid off the pot. He stared for about a second and a half, and did a sort of Stan Laurel fumble as he slammed it back on. Turning a colour no one on Earth had ever seen, he indicated how he wouldn't mind being let off right here, thanks. He was out the door long before the car came to a stop. Roger seemed unusually serene for the rest

I don't care. You bought it, it's yours." I think that is my main Roberta Findlay story.

DK: Is *Her Name Was Lisa* told from the point of view of a woman lying in state?

RW: No, No, she's dead and the film is told from the point of view of the people coming to pay their respects at the funeral parlour. I don't like the film very much. It had some things I like quite a bit: it has a scene where Vanessa Del Rio is injecting Lisa with heroin and stuff. And I like the ending, it's pretty bleak.

But what I don't like is Dave Derby's photography and directing of the sex. And its tempo. It looks like a Mexican Super-8 loop or some shit. That's why some of the later pornography I did I directed everything. If I've got to do it, it's going to look good.

MB: How did you work together, you and Derby?

RW: I would direct the dialogue, get everybody naked and say "Okay, Dave!" [laughs] It was insane, the whole thing was insane. Here we are, Easter Sunday, 1979. There are derelict coke-heads lying on the floor, some bitch got mad at Samantha Fox, picked up a knife, threw it at her, it went in the wall about this far from her head. There are drugs all over the place. I'm turning around and some guy's dick is standing there...

DK: Would you have been familiar with Ed Sanders' book, *The Family*?

RW: Big inspiration. Major! I got married July 2, 1972. I'm working at a TV station as a cameraman and I was reading that book and I was absolutely fascinated by it, and pretty creeped out. And then what happened, I was editing Nicholas Ray's last picture — do you know about me and Nicholas Ray? Nicholas Ray is the guy who directed *Rebel Without a Cause*, *They Lived by Night*... So I was editing Nick's last movie and it was a madhouse...

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of the day.

When did you last view the film?

This morning.

What are your impressions of it now?

I showed it once to an economics/business professor of fairly conventional taste, who had heard of the famous "Old Main" movie and wanted to see it. Okey dokey. She sat goggle-eyed, fist in mouth, through the whole thing, and stared at the empty screen for a while afterwards.

"It's very creative in a lot of ways," she said. "But it's such a... strange... place to go."

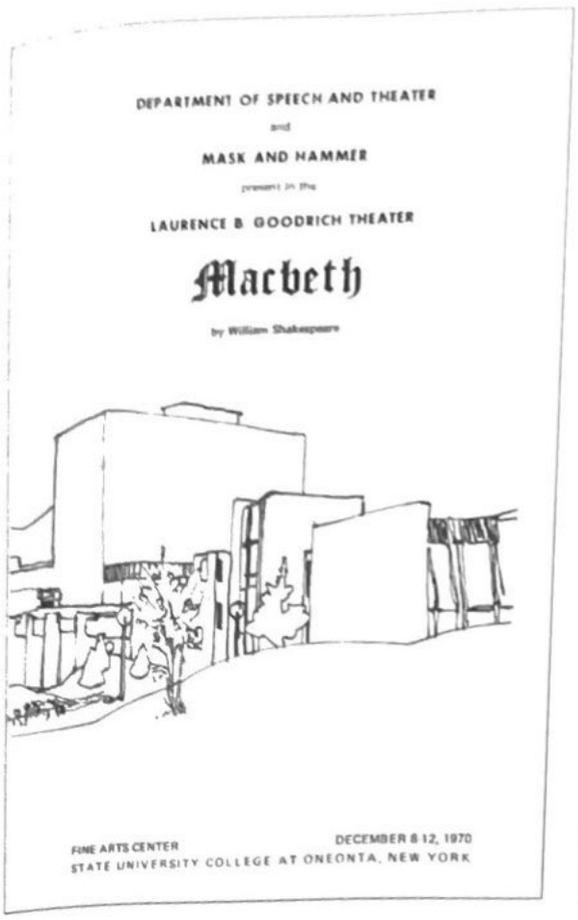
That seems fair, I think.

Were you aware of the cult following *Last House* was building down the years?

No. The first clue came in 1988 when I saw it listed in a cult-film catalogue as the "infamous deer-hoof movie." I pretty much dismissed that as ad-copy blurb. Then, surfing the pre-web net in the early nineties I came across several lengthy discussions of *Last House* in a couple of newsgroups and listserves. They were comparing this version with that version and where could you find a good dub and was it the all-time horror champ of the seventies, and so on. I began to realise that the film had a loyal following, though I had no clue as to its size and extent. Then when the web exploded three or four years ago, it became clear that *Last House* had had a vast secret life that I was entirely unaware of. I was flabbergasted.

Any anecdotes you'd like to share?

I think I'm about anecdoted out. ■



DEPARTMENT OF SPEECH AND THEATER

and

MASK AND HAMMER

present in the

LAURENCE B. GOODRICH THEATER

Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

FINE ARTS CENTER
STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE AT ONEONTA, NEW YORK

DECEMBER 8-12, 1970

Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

Muriel Kellerhouse
Director

Junius N. Hamblin
Designer

Theodore G. Kottke
Public Relations Advisor

Eleanor Gilroy
Costumer

CAST

Duncan, *soldier*	Douglas Carver
Malcolm	Thomas Holowach
Donalbain, *soldier*	Ronald Buxbaum
Macbeth	Michael Marraffino
Banquo	Roger Watkins
Macduff	Bennett Siegel
Witch 3	Madeleine Faber
Lord	Kenneth Rouse
Murderer 1, *soldier*	Arthur Merrill
Murderer 2, *soldier*	Wayne Benjamin
Murderer 3, *soldier*	William Mullahy
Messenger, *soldier*	Charles Jabbonsky

PRODUCTION STAFF

Francis P. Sabedra
Stage Technician

Assistant Director
Mary Kaplun

Sound
Kenneth Fisher, *chief*; Marshall Fuhr, Valerie Miller, Gail Schauder

Stage
Michael Squire, *chief*; Gayle Becker, Diane Costa, Sarah Flowers, Mary Nulty, Robert Seaman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Special Music Effects
Carleton Clay Robert Solano Stephen Myer

For Play Critique
David Betts

For Properties
Fred Miller

MASK AND HAMMER OFFICERS

Douglas Frank, *President*
Arthur Toretzky, *Vice President*
Mary Kaplun, *Secretary*
David Holumzer, *Treasurer*

Program designs by James Mullen

Programme for 1970 college production of *Macbeth*, which includes budding *Last House* stars Roger Watkins ('Banquo'), Ken Rouse ('Lord') and Ken Fisher (Sound).

MB: Didn't he die very young?

RW: No, Nick died of cancer. When I met him I was twenty-two; he was I think sixty-two. He died just a few years later. There is a very good film called *Lightening Over Water* by Wim Wenders, in which you actually get to watch Nick die of cancer. It's pretty disturbing. It also shows scenes from the movie of Nick's that I cut, which I like.

That was a depraved time... that's when I started to get into all kinds of drugs and shit. There was a Czechoslovakian producer who was coming to New York to meet with Nick because he wanted him to direct Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. The two of them had said they would work for this producer so long as he got Nick Ray to direct.

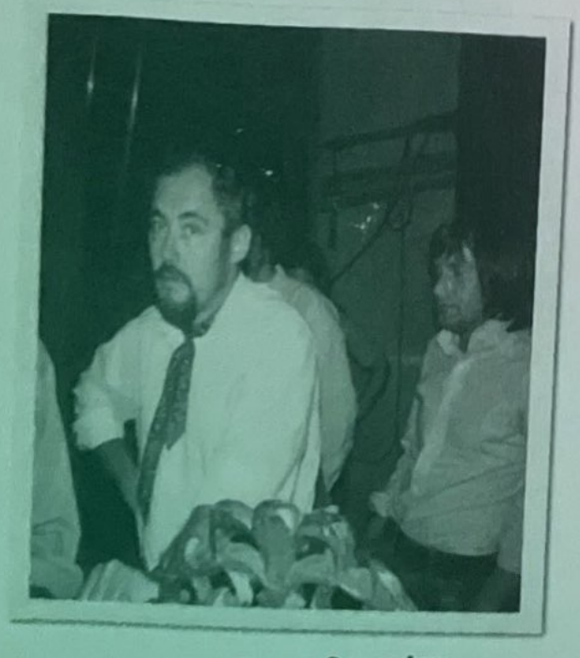
I hate to talk badly of him, but Nick was really wasted. No, I shouldn't say that, I liked Nick, he just wasn't capable of doing the film at that time, I don't think. Anyway, he sent me to see this producer — I can't remember his name...

Okay, just a little aside to show you how serendipitous I think most lives are: the reason I met Nick Ray was because I was driving up-state to New York and I picked up a kid hitchhiking who told me that at his school was this famous movie director teaching film. He says, "I think it's Nick Ray." I was like, "Are you kidding me?" So, I went up there

and that's how I met Nick, and that's how I went into this situation where I was supposed to meet this producer from Czechoslovakia — because Nick just wouldn't go. This guy is a little perturbed that we were talking and says, "You know what I would do if I were you? You're a very intense looking young man. I would take that whole Charlie Manson thing that you have in this country and I would turn it into a film — if I was making a low-budget film and I wanted to be noticed."
So that's how the whole thing happened.

MB: Was Nick Ray straight or gay?

RW: You know, I always thought he was straight. I never got any homosexual vibes from him at all. Now here's the reason Nick Ray leaves Hollywood: he comes home one night and finds Gloria Grahame, his wife, in bed with his seventeen-year-old son. So that's why Nick flipped and left the town.
John Houseman wrote this series of books about his past with Orson Welles, the theatre and motion pictures, and in it he mentions that Nick was having this problem with his sexuality a lot. Also I read that Gore Vidal was over in Hollywood writing an essay, and he sees Nick Ray is trying to pick up Sal Mineo, and they are playing with each other's balls at the pool or something.
I'll tell you about a great night I spent with Nick Ray. His girlfriend was from New York, and would come up to Binghampton every weekend and take the plane back to New York City. So we were in the Binghampton Airport, loaded, sitting at the bar. On the TV comes *Rebel Without a Cause*, and I'm sitting there with Nick and I'm like "Wow". He told me all kinds of fun stories. It was just a great thing that would be hard to duplicate.
But yes, I think you're right about Nick Ray.
I made this film called *Black Snow*. Actually when I showed it to Nick, he thought it was just... it was not anything, it was atypical of my work. It wasn't narrative film. But I set out to prove how easy it was to be avant-garde and so made *Black Snow*, and Nick goes, "Yeah, easy for you maybe, but it's not easy!" Then he set me up with [underground filmmaker and spokesman] Jonas Mekas who also watched it. Eight or nine months later I got this postcard from Mekas saying, 'Roger, I just want you to know I think *Black Snow* is the most unforgettable film I've seen this year, which is saying a lot because I see about six pictures a day.'



Jimmy Sangster, 1970.

DK: Some of the dialogue in *Dead End Street* with the creepy-crawly, girlie followers — "Terry is the answer, oh yes" — is obviously Manson influenced ...

RW: Right! I wrote that on an envelope. There was nothing else there on the soundtrack but a heartbeat, and I always thought the heartbeat was a little hokey. I still think it is. But the first time we were dubbing it I thought it was just too empty, so I wrote that dialogue. That's how that happened.

DK: How did you go about the dubbing process?

RW: I met Francis Ford Coppola. He never saw the film, but we got along real well. I didn't have any money, so he tells me about this place in Princeton, New Jersey, where

I could dub this thing cheap. It *was* cheap. So I took about four or five people down there. Suzy, who appears in the film, went along. My wife dubbed a couple of voices, Ken Fisher was there and some of the other people from the film were there. Years later, when the distributors picked up the film, they cut it down and then decided they had to re-dub it because the old dubbing wouldn't fit the new print. So we re-dubbed it in a place in New York City called Ross Gaffney where I wound up editing virtually everything, and that is why there are two different dubbed prints.

I know a lot of people have told me they like the fact that the dubbing is not quite in sync, but I've always hated it. It makes the film almost unwatchable for me. I mean they didn't even take the time to clean up the dubbing, which is ridiculous.

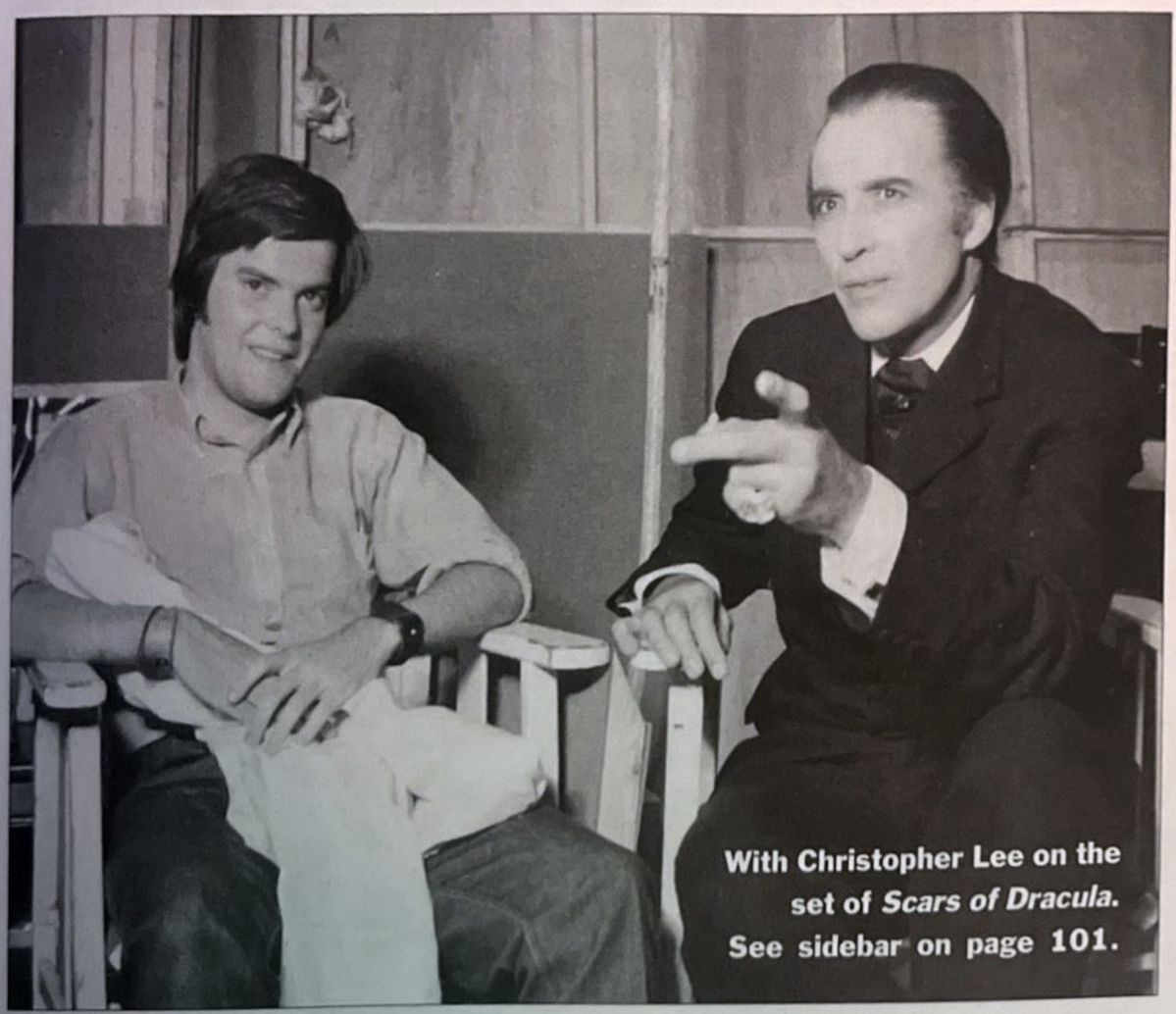
MB: I suppose people like it because it's kind of amateurish and dodgy.

RW: I guess. But I don't like amateurism. I deplore it [laughs].

DK: People also thought for a long time that it was a European film dubbed into English.

RW: It's funny, about ten or twelve years ago I walked into some underground video store on St Marks and asked the guy if he had *Last House on Dead End Street*. He goes, "Oh man, once you see it you can't forget it. Made in Europe." And I say, "No, no, it wasn't made in Europe, it was made in New York." "No man, it was made in Europe." He didn't know it was me, which I thought was funny.

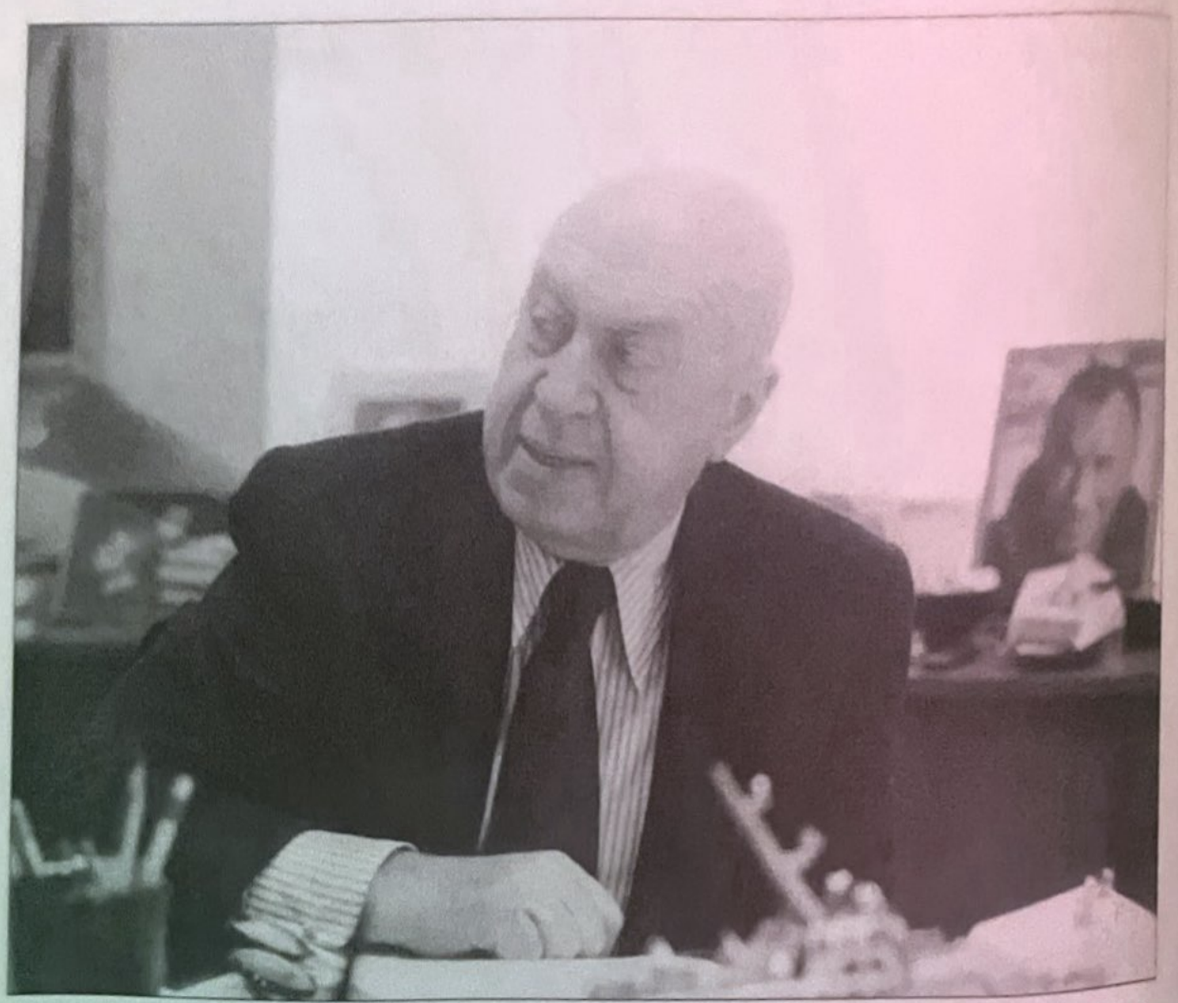
DK: You used Otto Preminger's old Bolex camera in *Dead End Street*. How did you get a hold of that?



With Christopher Lee on the set of *Scars of Dracula*.
See sidebar on page 101.

RW: I went to Hollywood right after I graduated from college and it was awful. The first day I was there I got this job on a film by Ted V Mikels. He's an absolute asshole. It was called *Blood Orgy of the She-Devils*, and I didn't want any part of it. It was just depressing to me that here I am, I get a job within an hour, and it's just shit — it's shit people and it's dumb people and nobody has any talent and it was disturbing to me. There was this black guy in the film and he's a voodoo god or some shit. I'm talking to him and he goes, "Well, there's just no jobs for black actors." I said, "Have you thought of Othello?". He goes "No, where's Othello?" So I just walked off the set. I left after about forty minutes.

I was going to stay with a friend of mine who was stationed in the navy out on Long Beach. He had a TV guide and on the cover was Burgess Meredith, who happened to live not far from where we lived across the river. I had his home phone number or something, and I called him. The call got forwarded to him in California, where he was working on a film called *The Man*, written by Rod Sterling. He says to me, "What are you doing in California? There's nothing here. Go back to my house. Otto Preminger is staying in it while I'm out here. Tell Otto I sent you." So I went to his house, knocked on the door — and of course Burgess Meredith hadn't told him anything. Otto was whatever you wanted him to be. He had the jodhpurs, the high boots and all that — Burgess Meredith had a horse farm, so there was a reason for it.



Otto Preminger, 1971.

I said, "I'd like to show you some of my films." I'll never forget this, he says [in a sharp, no-nonsense voice], "You won't waste my time, will you?" I said, "No, absolutely not." "Alright, come by Saturday." So I went over on a Saturday morning, and Otto was there with his two little twins, and his son's girlfriend who was this horror that Preminger

absolutely hated because she went around the house in her underpants and stuff. He was a very prim, moral guy. I liked him. So his two daughters sit down in this bedroom to watch these two movies of mine. The first one was called *Ron Rico*. His twins are like six-years-old or whatever. I say, "Mr Preminger, I don't think they should be seeing this film." He goes, "Mr Watkins, I don't believe in censorship. Run the film." About four minutes into the film you see a nun masturbating with a wine bottle in front of an altar, and he goes, "Stop the projector. Out, out, out!" [laughs] He liked it and said, "What do you shoot your films on? I have a Bolex you can have, I never use it." So he gave me his Bolex, which is what you see the guys in *Dead End Street* using to make their movies.

Otto invited me along to a movie he was filming called *Such Good Friends*. It was almost done, he had maybe two weeks left on it and I went with him everyday. It was really a nice relationship I had with him, he was nice to me. Nobody else thought he was nice, everybody else *hated* him. I liked him. He directed a Broadway play called *Full Circle* which he took me along to watch. Yeah, he was good to me.

Richard had all he needed to hold his marriage together. Miranda, Audrey, Jessica, Marcy, Doria...
SUCH GOOD FRIENDS X
AN OTTO PREMINGER FILM
DYAN CANNON JAMES COCO JENNIFER O'NEILL KEN HOWARD NINA FOCH
LAURENCE LUCKINBILL and LOUISE LASSER as Marcy
BURGESS MEREDITH
O.C. SMITH SINGING "SUDDENLY IT'S ALL TOMORROW"
ESTHER DALE
DAVID SHABER
LOIS GOULD
THOMAS Z. SHEPARD
ROUBEN TER-ARUTUNIAN
GAYNE KESCHER
PARAMOUNT
OTTO PREMINGER
PARAMOUNT From MARCH 23rd

MB: How old was he then?

RW: Otto was probably in his sixties. He was married to the widow of, I guess, the president of US Steel, so you know the kind of circles she'd been in all her life. I mean — impeccable, well groomed, the whole bit, everything just right. But I think she was a pain in the ass to Otto because she would be there at these rehearsals. Who played Mr Spock in *Star Trek*?

DK/MB: Leonard Nimoy.

RW: He was a part of *Full Circle*, and Bibi Anderson was there. Otto would send her out on errands. He would say, "Nimoy is playing this refugee on the last day of WWII. He needs this jacket to wear..." So she would go out and get it. I'll never forget — she comes in with this box from Sacks on 5th Avenue, with like a $600 suede coat. Absolutely no concept of what was going on at all. But that's how I left Preminger.

DK: Did Preminger influence your character Terry Hawkins?

RW: No, I don't think so.

DK: Did you base that character on anyone? Everyone who has seen *Dead End Street* comes away thinking "That's a scary guy!"

RW: [laughs] I think it was just Charlie Manson — that's who influenced it. He was a pretty scary guy.

DK: Can you tell us a bit about how you did the music?

RW: The film was being — I'm not going to use the word 're-cut' — truncated at Ross Gaffney, and I got to be good friends with this guy Jim Gaffney who owned the place. Originally, this music professor from Oneonta State wanted to do the music. Well he did do it but it was horrendous. I didn't

want to tell him, "Jesus Christ, this is shit!" [laughs] but it was awful! He would do it for free so I couldn't really say anything too bad about it. It exists somewhere. It sounds like a tuba playing. Just awful. I didn't know about things like stock music, where you can go into a cutting house or whatever, and every time they drop the needle onto a track they charge you something like $100. So we got the music from the stock at Ross Gaffney, and it was synthesised by myself and Jim Flamberg — who, oddly enough, just co-wrote the movie *Nurse Betty*. I don't know if you saw it?

MB: It won Best Screenplay at Cannes, didn't it?

RW: I think it did, yeah. It came out here and disappeared, which is too bad. But anyway Flamberg was a good guy. But that's where the music came from — just stock music, distorted.

DK: There are some clever scenes which I like in the movie. One that comes to mind is the shot of yourself in Mrs Palmer's bedroom — just before the lovemaking scene — where you get a close-up, a mid-shot, and a long shot all in the one scene because of the position of a mirror.

RW: Yeah, I like that. Thank you for noticing.

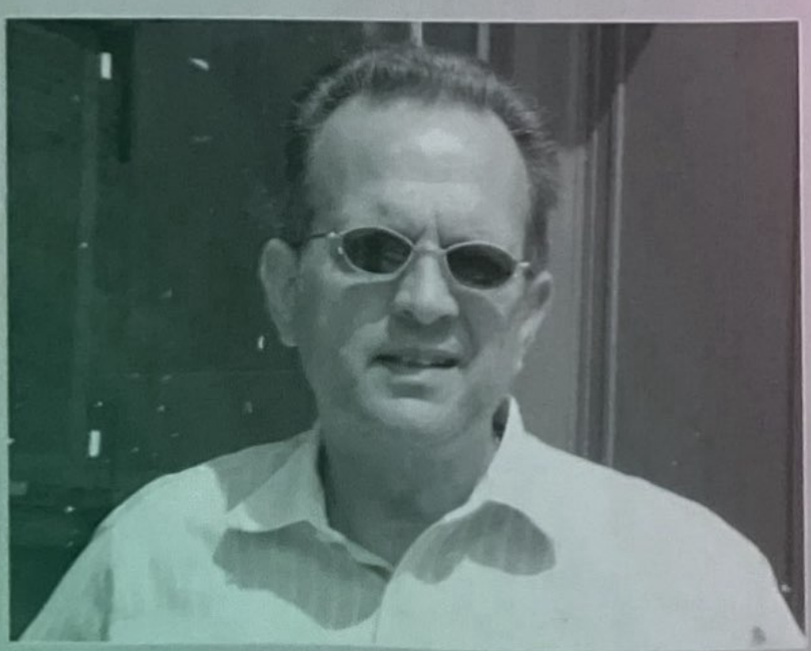
DK: Were you consciously striving to set the scene up in that way?

RW: Yes, absolutely.

DK: I wonder if you can explain something about another memorable sequence, the one where Mrs Palmer is wearing black face makeup and is being flagellated by a guy who pretends to be Quasimodo.

RW: Disturbing isn't it? Ken Rouse, good friend of mine. He and I used to sing Simon

Photo: David Kerekes



An interview with STEVE SWEET

Last House co-star

STEVE SWEET: ...The last time I saw Roger Watkins was in 1978, New York City. I was working as an actor in a show called *El Grande le Coca Cola*, which was at the Plaza Theatre, in the Plaza Hotel. I got this idea for a band, the concept of which was kind of a middle-of-the-road Rock'n'Roll band that would open for a major Las Vegas comic. Whereas normally you have a comedian opening for a major singer, I was

and Garfunkel together. But he could do this tremendous hunchback thing, and to hear him talk... it was really funny. Remember I told you the 'lost' opening of the film, of the twenty minutes in the slaughterhouse? Well, you're going into all kinds of things with Terry Hawkins being arrested, going to these parties, meeting all these characters — which that whipping scene was originally a part of. That scene was also much longer.

I think my only intention was to shock. That was it. I always thought Al Jolson was funny [laughs].

I think a lot of people are also disturbed by that little kid wandering around while the flagellation is taking place.

I believe you'd better not print this name, but that sequence was shot in the house of a woman named ———. She had this big, huge department store called ——— and she was very, very wealthy. I mean, they had an indoor pool and everything. I had women getting naked, and Ken Fisher was saying to me: "How are you doing this?" [laughs] It

NICHOLAS RAY

2nd MAY 1972

To Whom It May Concern:

This will introduce Roger Watkins, an ardent young film maker who would like to show you some of his work and be considered for work as an actor, ass't. Editor, Ass't. cameraman etc., you know, eager and a good concentration with better than average technical information for the equivalent experience. On one occasion he helped me out with alertness and efficiency on a subject about which he had no previous knowledge.

Yrs., Nick

Letter of reference by Nicholas Ray.

thinking I'd put together a sort of theatrical, comedic Rock'n'Roll band and open for somebody like Jay Leno or whatever... So I was putting a demo tape together in a studio with a live audience, and that was the last time I saw Roger. He came into New York to be part of that audience, with Ken Fisher. That was 1978. Twenty-two years ago.

DAVID KEREKES: Can you tell us about your part in *Last House on Dead End Street*?

I played the part of the sleazy, pornographic movie producer, 'Steve.' Roger explained the part to me — I wonder if I could be liable for this? He said, "It's sort of a Rex Reed kind of character, you know, a little, bitchy, fag kind of a guy." And I said, "Right, I think I can stretch to that." So that's the part I played. He ends up in this big humiliation scene, forced to suck this deer foot penis. And Roger's holding a mirror up so that I can see this thing happening, and he's saying, "Did you get that?"

How did you get involved with the film?

Well, Roger had graduated from the same university, which was part of the State University of New York at Oneonta the year before. And I knew him from that time. We weren't really close friends by any means, but I was good buddies with the fellow who ended up shooting the film, Ken Fisher. That's how I was put in touch with Roger, and he told me about this concept for the film and I was happy to do it.

Had you done any acting before?

Yes, I was in my last year at university in a drama degree, so all through my college years I was doing student productions. Two years before I had got my first professional job at

was amazing. I think that boy wandering around the shot might have been her grandson or something. I was a little bit offended that the kid was there, and more so that nobody seemed to care that he was in the movie.

DK: He actually brings the whip, doesn't he?

RW: Yes, he brings the whip in on a pillow [laughs].

DK: There is also a scene near the end of the film of yourself standing motionless for a long time, holding a hacksaw, which looks as though you might have intended to have some dialogue...

RW: You got it. Any opportunity I had in the film to make the dubbing easier I would take. So that's the reason with the mask, which hides our mouths. But that might have inspired the scene to tell you the truth. I'm not even thinking consciously of what is a good way to cover up the mouth. There are masks all the way through it. It's so long now, I can't remember what led to what. But trying to hide the mouths may have led to that scene. Here is something related to that: when we were done filming, Ken Fisher and I went to see Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* — which, incidentally, I don't think is that good a film. But anyway at one point in that

COMICS AND HORROR FILMS

'Influential comics: The EC Line, of course. Can't really think of anything else that influenced me — though I did like a lot of the Marvel titles from the sixties, especially DR STRANGE. 'There's not many horror films out there I like. PI, REQUIEM FOR A DREAM, THE EVIL DEAD, all come to mind. I like VanBebber's films a good deal. Had the privilege of having him show them to me at his girlfriend's house out in Los Angeles with the Polanski site breathing down the valley.'

Email from Roger, Sept 8, 2001

the Lake George Play House, which is in upper New York City in the resort area. I had made my professional debut in two productions: *The Odd Couple* and *Stop the World I Want to Get Off*. Once we had finished *Last House*, I left University and moved to New York City where I worked for about seven years as a professional actor.

What is your most overriding memory of the film?

The late night shoots, I guess. That spooky old abandoned building that most of the stuff takes place in. It was actually a university building that had fallen into disuse, or actually there may have still been some admin offices on the first floor. Since then, the building has been torn down, it doesn't exist anymore. And all of us, with the exception of Roger and Ken, were university students about to finish — or university professors. The guy who gets killed, was a doctor in theatre... so we all had day jobs... We were shooting sometimes in the afternoons but quite often very late into the evening, in particular all those murder sequences. Two, three, four o'clock in the morning. The whole thing got shot in about three weeks and I don't think Roger slept more than twelve or fifteen hours in that entire time. He would be writing through the day and then shooting through the night.

Have you seen the film since it was completed?

I've seen it once on video. Pretty horrible, pretty amateurish.

Do you recall any theatrical release in the seventies? Any advertising?

It's funny, because I was there in New York

movie is this scene with people wearing hospital gowns and masks. I said to Ken "We are fucked! If they do what we just did we are fucked!" But they didn't, so it didn't really matter.

DK: The other interesting thing in that scene: you are wearing a mask but behind you on the wall is this huge painted mouth with teeth.

RW: You want to know how that happened? That was actually serendipity. I was getting ready to shoot that scene. We were in this building called Old Main, which was once the college — it was huge. This is how things would happen: I had everything set up and all of a sudden I hear Ken Fisher say, "Hey Rog, check this out!" and he comes in with these big lips that he had found some place. There was a theatre there so it was probably a prop in something. I said "Oh man, that's great! Tack 'em up!" That's how that happened. It was never planned.

DK: You say you had the masks to try and aid the dubbing. But there is more to it than that, because you are actually swapping the masks around in a ritualistic manner...

RW: Very good! Nobody picks this up. The secret to low-budget filmmaking is making the most out of what you have. You have this tremendous old building that was perfect, with gargoyles carved into the stone and everything. When I first went up to Oneonta I was... well, as high as a kite [laughs]. I hadn't even really thought about the film, I just knew it was going to be about Manson. I went to this theatre professor who had just directed *Oedipus Rex*. He had that big white mask [which features on the cover of this Headpress] in his house and I was like "Wow, can I have that?" He goes, "You can have it. I'm just going to throw it away." So that's how the whole motive for the mask started in my mind.

I like it when, at the end of the film, they take the mask off Terry and put it on Ken...

City, but I don't remember it playing. And I lost touch with Roger, so I didn't know about it.

How closely were you required to follow a script?

There was a basic script. There was an outline, and some scenes were fully scripted and others were... I imagine it's the way John Cassavetes worked because some of it was scripted and some of it was like, "Well, here's where we want to get to. Let's just play with it." And the actors would improvise it and it would just get shot. It was a pastiche of things, you know? Some absolutely scripted stuff. I remember that scene with Ed Pixley — [who played Palmer] the bad director of pornographic films — when we are watching one of the porno films: it's over-exposed and I'm saying, "This is terrible. This is dreck. I could make a hornier movie with a Brownie Funsaver and two Brownies." That was absolutely scripted, and then other things came as they came.

Do you remember any particular scenes that were improvised?

The deer foot sucking scene was pretty much improvised. We didn't have any dialogue written for that and I can't remember if any gets spoken. If I were to do that again today — I've thought about this — I would actually do it much differently. Ken and Roger found these deer hooves over at Ken's parents' house. His father was a keen hunter and they were taxidermist's deer hooves... why anybody would want the deer hooves as opposed to the head I don't know. His father didn't strike me as a kinky guy! So they found these things and the way Roger tells it, he said, "This is going to be perfect for Steve," and took one of the things and shoved it in his

When Suzy Neumeyer is tied to the chair and she's waking up and they are just placing the mask on and off her. Things like that, I like. That is how the mask thing happened.

DK: That also helps to generate a lot of the creepiness of the film: there is no reason why these people do what they do — you know these people must be crazy.

RW: I'll tell you the one thing that offends me most about the film now, and the way it was torn apart: that little voice-over at the end that states we all went to jail for a billion years. That makes my skin crawl.

DK: That isn't your voice?

RW: No. The guy whose voice that is committed suicide not long after.

MB: Really?

RW: Hmm, I was there.

DK: The famous scene at the end where you've got the horned girl and the hoof — how did that come about?

RW: We were over at Ken's parents' house filming the scene in the bedroom, where I'm having sex with Mrs Palmer. The crew comprises of me, Ken Fisher and Mrs Palmer. We shoot the thing and Ken, all of a sudden, comes in the room with the lips and he's got all these deer hooves. "Look at this shit!" And I tell him to bring the stuff along because we're gonna use it. I don't know how, but we're gonna use it.

So we've got this stuff in a bag. I thought, "We've just tore a woman apart and we just did the nastiest thing in the history of horror — what do we do next?" You can't tear apart a man, you can't tear apart anybody now. You've got to go beyond, and how do you do that? Well, having a homosexual sucking on a deer hoof is certainly pretty odd...

But this is typical of the mess made in cutting the film: after the hoof sucking we let

own mouth. I have to assume that's true because that's exactly what he came to me with for the scene. I was kind of a little freaked out and he said, "I want you to really get into it, you know." I said, "I'll do the scene but I don't see the character as being able to get into it. I see it as — okay, he's gay and everything, but he's a successful porno producer and he's just horrified and disgusted by it. I'll do it but I'm going to fight it." Now, thirty years later — I was twenty-one or twenty-two at the time; I'm fifty now — I can see as an actor it would have been much more interesting to fight against it first and then get turned on by it. And it would probably have had more screen time... allow the lustful, glazed over look... then really get into felating this hoof. The whole subtext would be: I know I'm dead anyway, I might as well go out in glory. It only took me about twenty-eight years to come to that realisation, that it would have been a better artistic choice to really go for it!

What was the atmosphere like on the set?

It was a particularly stressful time for Roger because one of the actresses [Barbara McGraw] left the production. After she'd shot a nude scene she decided she didn't want to be a part of it. The scene that you see with the girl in the bathtub was originally done with [McGraw] — a very talented actress, by the way — who had second thoughts. Now, when we started this, Roger had us sign a release that said we had no rights to anything — and we were happy enough to do that. When this actress decided to leave the film she asked for her release back and Roger gave it to her. Why he did, I don't know and my understanding of it was that Roger said to her, "I won't use the footage in the film." He did show the footage to some investors, some dailies of her in the bathtub, and she sued him for it. That effectively held up the release of *Last House* because all the film was

Sweet go. He starts running through all these places and he runs into the scenes of all the murders. Originally, we had him go through a final door only to find he's in his own house. It was so disorienting, it was really creepy. That was an idea inspired by *2001: A Space Odyssey* — where the guy goes through Infinity and winds up in this bedroom. I thought that was so wonderful. So Sweet winds up in his own house and it's totally disorienting and you think, "What the fuck is going on?" It's totally illogical. He sits down in this chair and he's trying to re-orientate himself and then — *Kaboom!* — the lights come on and the killers drill his eye out.
That's just an example of how much better the film was in its original form.

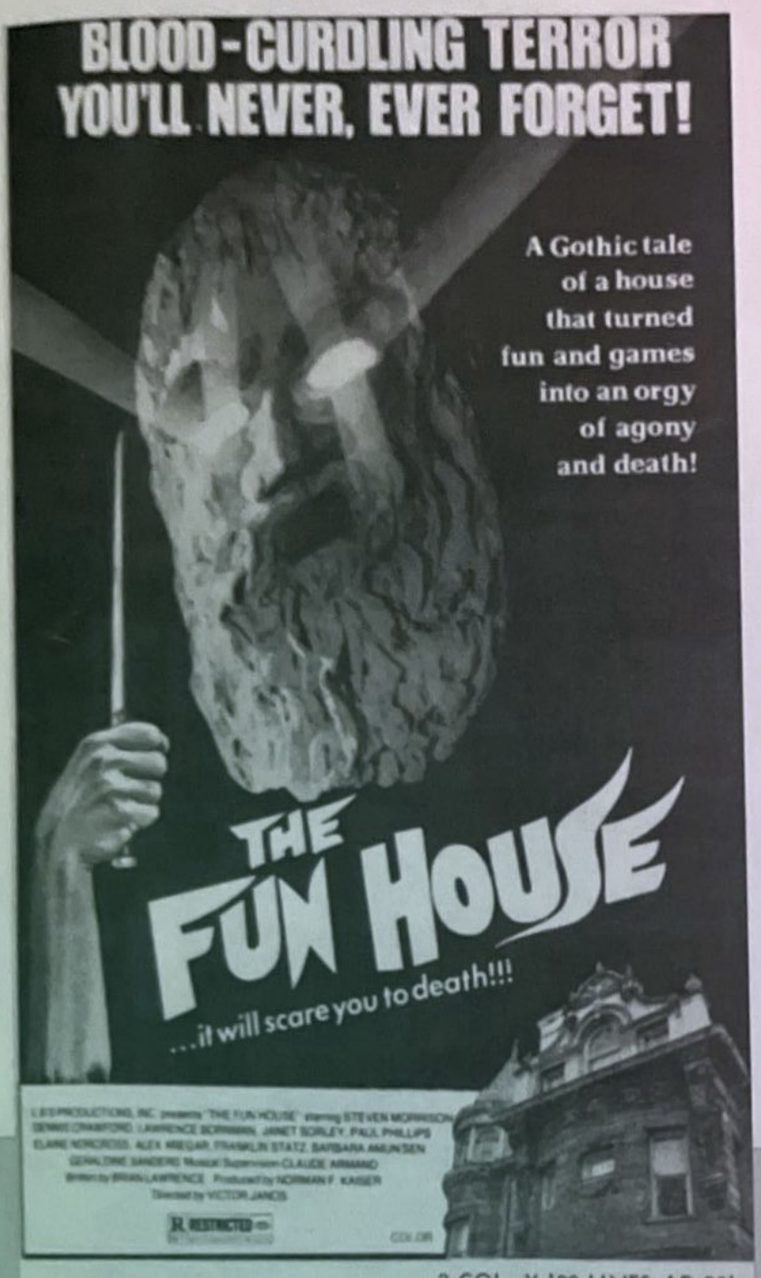
DK: The first time I saw *Dead End Street* the print was really bad and washed out. I saw a better quality version more recently and only just realised that in the goat hoof scene, Steve is not only being forced to felate the hoof but — even more perversely

Steve Sweet as 'Steve', the homosexual porn movie producer who is humiliated, forced to felate a deer hoof, and murdered in *Last House on Dead End Street*. (The deer hoof girl, third image — passive and emotionless — exudes evil.)

impounded while the case went to the Supreme Court.
Back to what you said: we had fun. I can remember that night sawing off Nancy's limbs... a hole cut in the table and another actress underneath with her leg coming through, so you could show breaking the leg off and somebody behind the table with a syringe of stage blood, doing a pumping thing and so on, and we were all giddy. It's like three o'clock in the morning and various things would go wrong. That ancient Airoflex camera would break down and we'd have to re-saw the leg.

What was Roger like to work with?

I really have a great deal of respect for Roger, the fact that he got it done and the he got people to do the things that they did, are a testament to his own charisma and I think that comes across in the film. Certainly the


BLOOD-CURDLING TERROR
YOU'LL NEVER, EVER FORGET!
A Gothic tale of a house that turned fun and games into an orgy of agony and death!
THE FUN HOUSE
...it will scare you to death!!!
R RESTRICTED

3 COL. X 120 LINES-AD 301

— has a mirror held up to him while he's doing so!

RW: That's one of my favourite things by the way, that's one of my favourite images and nobody has ever noticed that, I don't think. I don't know how they don't notice it. What's even neater is the fact she pulls the mirror down and there is this hideous gargoyle woman staring right in his face. I think that's really creepy. I think that's the creepiest shot in the movie.

DK: Were you trying to make some kind of point with that?

RW: Someone once said there's something about holding a mirror up to yourself and seeing what you are... To me, Sweet is the lowest thing in the movie, the lowest common denominator. I like the fact that they are making him look at himself in this moment of absolute humiliation — *and this is what you are, right*? They're pulling the mir-

Can you tell us anything about the porno loops screened in *Last House*?

They were made specifically for the film by Roger.

There's a funny scene where you and Palmer are watching these loops...

What's the line? "It's like an albino tit in an out of focus snowstorm."

An then a Labrador wanders into shot...

"Well use it, use it, for God's sake use it!"

You remember your lines well after all these years!

Yeah, it's funny that.
I'll tell you one thing. You know the opening sequence is done in a slaughterhouse? We

only character that's really ever developed is Roger's character, Terry Hawkins. There is a kind of raw power to his performance and it always sort of interested me that he didn't pursue the acting side of it. It didn't really interest him that much. He did some terrific things at university. I saw him do the Jamie character in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and he was awesome on stage. I personally think that he could have been the next Jack Nicholson, if you like — that wonderful evil, charismatic persona.

Did you see him perform on stage anywhere else?

No, the only thing I ever saw him in was *Long Day's Journey*, probably in 1972.

ror away and saying, *He's a monster too.*

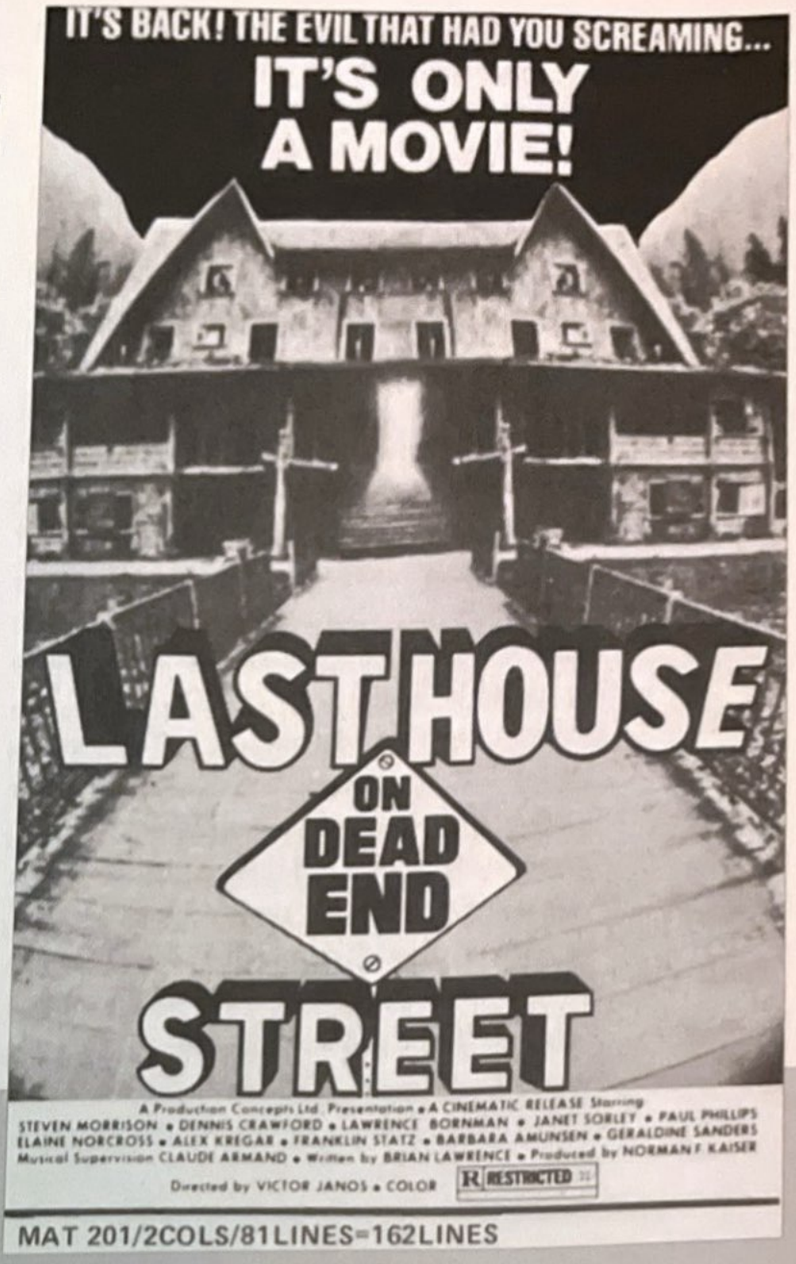
DK: Moving on to the actual release of *Dead End Street*: What was the audience reaction like when it played theatres?

RW: This would be Summer of 1979 while I was editing *Her Name Was Lisa*: I was walking down 9th Avenue when a guy comes up to me and says, "Holy shit, are you in that movie, cutting people up and shit?" I said no. He said "It's you, I know it's you. Don't you know what happened to that film?" It turns out this guy was in charge of posters and getting the trailers out and all this other stuff. His name was Bob Warmflash I believe.

DK: *Warmflesh*?

MB: Warmflash.

RW: Exactly [laughs]. He says to me, "Don't you know what happened to this picture?" This was so bizarre to me — I'd made it in


IT'S BACK! THE EVIL THAT HAD YOU SCREAMING...
IT'S ONLY A MOVIE!
LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET
A Production Concepts Ltd. Presentation • A CINEMATIC RELEASE Starring
STEVEN MORRISON • DENNIS CRAWFORD • LAWRENCE BORNMAN • JANET SORLEY • PAUL PHILLIPS
ELAINE NORCROSS • ALEX KREGAR • FRANKLIN STATZ • BARBARA AMUNSEN • GERALDINE SANDERS
Musical Supervision CLAUDE ARMAND • Written by BRIAN LAWRENCE • Produced by NORMAN F. KAISER
Directed by VICTOR JANOS • COLOR
R RESTRICTED
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were at an actual slaughterhouse and I wasn't involved in any of the scenes that day, but I went along for the ride basically. I think they shot two or three days and I was there for one day, and it was horrific. I've got a vision of what Hell must be like: it's working in a slaughterhouse for eternity. We were all quite blown away by it. I mean people who see this film think probably think we're all a bunch of really sick, twisted fucks, but it really wasn't the case. We were just a bunch of kids and Roger was trying to make a buck. He wanted to make something that he could guarantee would have a return so that he could make another movie. But I remember leaving the slaughterhouse more or less shell-shocked at what we had seen. Things like one of the workers reaching down into a dead cow's uterus and pulling out an unborn foetus. It was just unbelievable. And we all left kind of shell-shocked...

It's only over the past year that I've realised that there are websites dedicated to *Last House*, and this all came about through the relationship that I have kept up throughout the years with Ken Fisher. About a year ago he e-mailed me and said, "You'll never guess what you'll find if you type in such-a-such..." Through that, Ken found some comments that Roger had made on one of the chat venues and he sort of teased Roger, he sent some cryptic messages in. Roger had been in contact with Otto Preminger way back, and Ken made some reference like, "Okay, Otto?" and all this stuff.

That reminds me... After I had moved to New York, within a year-and-a-half I was a working actor appearing in a hit New York show. Roger came into town and we were going out to a small studio in Princeton, New

1973, and now it's 1979. He says, "These guys took it and called it *The Funhouse*. You would never know it was your picture. They released it south of the Mason Dixie Line. It grossed almost $4 million down there. Now they're about to cut out the title and put a new title on it. They're going to call it *Last House on Dead End Street* and it's going to be all over the world in about three weeks." It was all so odd to me. I hated these people so much — I could tell you stories why they were awful people.

Sure enough about three weeks later, I'm living in Brooklyn, and couldn't turn on one of the independent channels without catching a trailer for *Last House on Dead End Street*. I couldn't believe it.

Anyway, the film was playing 42nd Street on the top bill; the bottom was *The Hills Have Eyes*. Paul Jensen and I went to see it and it caused a stir, yes it did [laughs]. It caused a ruckus. People were moaning, groaning, screaming, disgusted, repelled... I'm not sure anybody liked it, I don't think anybody liked it.

DK: You mentioned something about there being riots...

RW: Warmflash told me that. I found out since it was Dallas. They opened it up in Dallas, Texas, where there was an absolute riot and people started burning the theatre seats. I thought that was cool... You know, I like to

"Hey, Rog, check this out!"
The masked Terry Hawkins.

Jersey, to sync the dialogue for *Last House*. (Aside from Roger, none of our original voices ultimately appear because they were all re-dubbed.) And Roger said to me, "I'll introduce you Otto Preminger." Preminger had offices at the top of the Columbia Pictures building. So we went into Manhattan, we showed up at the offices, we got in the elevator, went up to the top — twenty-seventh floor or whatever it was — got out, and there was a battery of about seven assistants and secretaries. They said, "Hello, who are you?" "I'm Roger Watkins." "Do you have an appointment?" "No, just tell Otto it's Roger, he'll see me." And I was standing there like, this isn't going to happen, we're going to be thrown out of here. They exited for a minute and immediately we were shown into Preminger's office. Roger said "Otto, I want you to meet my friend Steve Sweet. He's appearing in *El Grande le Coca Cola* at the Plaza. "Very nice to meet you, Mr Sweet." He had this freeform white marble desk, this original Picasso hanging on the wall. There must have been millions of dollars' worth of art hanging on the wall. Maybe Preminger was a little past it, but he was pretty much at the height of his celebrity, appearing on *The Johnny Carson Show* and stuff. The power and the charisma of the man was palpable, it radiated off him in waves.

Do you recall much about the dubbing?

We were using an antiquated system. We were marrying an audio track to a film track and if you screwed up on the line, they had to stop the film, re-wind it, get up to speed and do it again. It was a very laborious process and we were all pretty much amateurs at this kind of thing... I remember Roger was particularly good at it, but I suppose having written the film and everything, having been with it for so long, he maybe knew what he was doing. ■

identify with [Experimental composer] Igor Stravinsky.

DK: Were you aware of the cult following that was building up around the film over the years?

RW: No, absolutely not.

MB: When did you find out about it?

RW: Suzanne knows about computers, search engines and stuff... Two-and-a-half years ago, when I first met Suzanne, any day of the week she'd find five or six people selling the video of *Dead End Street*. She tells me "Look on e-bay," and I did and thought, "This is kind of interesting." But I didn't think too much of it. I e-mailed one guy and found he was a professor at Yale! I thought it was pretty strange [laughs]. He starts telling me he has three *Dead End Street* posters: one in his office at Yale, one at home in his office... I thought it was nice, but I really didn't think too much about it, until about — what, three or four months ago...?

Mrs Palmer.

SUZANNE ROWE: I started on a message board — it was *Pages of Filth*. I just wrote, "Anybody interested in *Last House on Dead End Street*?" All of a sudden there's like fifty responding.

So, that's how it started.

MB: You just had no idea?

RW: None whatsoever.

DK: And what was your reaction?

RW: I was pleased. I was very pleased. It's nice to feel a little bit vindicated. You have to understand — when I made that film everybody was like, "Are you out of your fucking mind? This'll never be shown in a cellar!" A friend of mine, Richie McNichol, was selling Mercedes Benz' over across the river. He calls me one day in like 1974 — I wasn't even out of the courts yet — and he says, "Roger, there is this big shot from Italy named Alexander Hercone who wants to see *Last House on Dead End Street*." Now all I have is a 16mm b&w work print. He comes to the house, I'm sitting in the cellar with a 16mm projector, he watches the whole thing, doesn't say a word. This was great for me because nobody else ever got past the slaughterhouse at the first viewing. So he goes, "You have a special film here, but you have to find somebody that can market this thing. You have to find somebody that knows what they are doing because this isn't going to go out with Roger Corman or something." I just always appreciated the fact that he took the time to do that.

DK: What did he do with it?

RW: Nothing. He said, "I can't do anything with this. I like bikini beach movies and shit like that."

DK: You appeared on the *Howard Stern show*, is that right?

RW: Yeah.

DK: When was that?

RW: Oh about...

S: 1996 or 97.

RW: We have a comedian in America — he's quite popular and Howard Stern loves him. His name is Pat Cooper, and he wanted somebody young to write comedy material for a 'HBO Special'. So through some of my Sicilian friends I met Pat Cooper, we got along pretty well and I wrote a bunch of really, really sick stuff for him. He said, "Roger, I'm sixty-five, this stuff is for a thirty-five-year-old. I can't do this. This is the end of my career to do this." But he always paid me, and we were always friends. One day he calls me up and says, "Listen. I'm going to be on the *Howard Stern Show* tomorrow night. Howard's a sick fuck just like you are, why don't you come and meet him?" So that's how I got on. Pat freaked out on the show because I said something before he went on and it just turned into a big thing.

S: It was a big argument that occurred, which they play whenever Howard's on vacation.

DK: What's the sketch?

RW: It's not a sketch, it's an interview where Cooper went nuts. What happened was, I got to the studio before Pat Cooper, and there were all these people there sort of mean mouthin' him...

S: Not really, he's just paranoid!

RW: I figure out what they are going to do. They sequester these people away from me, and Pat comes in and I tell him, "Pat, they're setting you up. They're gonna ask you or Howard's gonna ask you 'Do you ever say anything bad about me?' and you're going to say 'No' and all that shit. Then they're going to bring in all these people, like your dentist, your butcher, your mailman, and all these people are gonna say how you hate Howard Stern." Well, he flipped out — they are filming all this, they're taping it. Pat storms out, and I thought, "Oh fuck, I'm never going to

The cast of Ken Fisher's play/film *Captain Jack's Revenge*. Ken Fisher (second from left), Roger Watkins (with peace pipe) and Bill Schlageter (second from right, later to play the cameraman in *Last House on Dead End Street*).

meet anybody." What happens is, they have these speakers with the radio show, and I hear Howard Stern go "Where's that guy who came in with Pat? I want to talk to him." You don't have a chance to think about it — you're in there, they just shove you in the studio. So I was like on the show for twenty minutes. It was pretty good. I'd made up my mind I wasn't going to be cute or funny or anything.

They talked about *Last House on Dead End Street* — or I did. Here's a funny story: have you heard of *The Ren and Stimpy Show*? Alright, I'm on the show and Stern asks, "What films have you done?" I said, "Well *Last House on Dead End Street... The Funhouse...*" I tried to make it seem like two films [laughs]. This guy at the back goes "*Dead End Street...*? I love that movie, that's a great movie!" I thought this fucking guy was the janitor or some shit, but it turns out it's Billy West, the guy who does the voices for *Ren and Stimpy*. My daughter loves *Ren and Stimpy*, so I wrote to him. I said "Jeez, Mr West. I didn't know that was you. Would you just write an autograph for my daughter?" Well, this guy sends back a cell from *The Ren and Stimpy Show*, a real colour cell, signed. It was beautiful. I thought that was nice.

MB: What was Howard Stern like?

RW: I don't like his show; Suzanne listens to it every morning. I don't really like it because I don't really like... oh I don't know, it doesn't really matter what I like, but I don't like it. Howard Stern... we got along well on the air. He has these long five or six minute commercial breaks, during which time he and I got to talk for a little while, and he's *nothing* like the radio show persona. He's really a sweet guy and he's obviously extremely intelligent.

MB: So it's just an act?

RW: Just an act, I'm happy to say, because if he acted like that in person I just don't think I'd like him.

DK: You mentioned earlier another horror film you'd made...

RW: Well, I was tied up in the courts for so long. Right over here, just up the road, there was a friend of mine named Pete Roma who had a film studio. I would photograph things for him and, you know, we would do alright with it. One day this guy named Leo Fenton — whom I should have erased in 1979 — comes in... on some level I should be grateful to these people because at least they had

SPITTOON

'This is what happened... Finished LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET in 1973. In 1976 I meet Leo Fenton who (and I know we've already discussed some of this) decides to bring LAST HOUSE out under the banner of his newly formed distribution company which he will use as a vehicle to make his wife a star (that horribly ugly, dwarfish, arrogant beyond words, self centred, egomaniacal, nincompoop who should have been drowned in a bucket on the day she was born).

'Jensen and I write a script (in less than a week) which is not a bad script at all. Titled A HERITAGE OF BLOOD it is shot (with a cast of four) at Leo's rundown Citizen Kane-like befouled mansion in Westchester County... just a couple of miles from where Suzanne and myself met you and Mikita.

'Of course the production is a nightmare: You can actually see the "star" looking for cue cards as she tries to deliver her lines; the crew was an inept bunch of shitheads from NYU, each one of them thinking they were a combination of Welles, Buñuel and Fellini. No, I take that back, each one of them thinking they were a combination of Michael Winner, Roy Ward Baker and numerous other money making hacks.

'No sense in going into detail. It would be like making a cancerous big deal out of a pimple on your nose. Hysterical uselessness.

'Okay. In 1977 Paul and I write SPITTOON, which is nothing more than a slightly exaggerated depiction of the filming of A HERITAGE OF BLOOD. I become a Nazi director famous from the silent era, Paul an uninterested writer... you get the point. Oddly the "Fentons" are hardly exaggerated at all. In fact they're right on target. Oh yes, the Fentons had a friend, Bernie Travis — he who committed suicide and made me happy. Bernie is the legless stand-up comedian named Jerome.

Continued on next page

the balls to put the film out. We start talking. He watches the movie and says, "I've got a friend whose father owns a chain of theatres. I think we can make money with this thing." So in the meantime his wife — who is just one of the biggest jokes I ever met in my life; I actually made a movie about this whole experience called *Spittoon* — wanted to be a movie star, she wanted to be a singer, she wanted to be this, that and the other, and she was none of these things. She used to do things like pay people to write sheet music for her and put her name on it so she could say "See, I wrote this music!" and blah, blah, blah. They were awful people, awful. At one point when we're making this film, I said "Leo, why the fuck are we making this film, it stinks?" and he goes "Yeah, but it's cheaper than a divorce" [laughs]. So anyway he wanted to make a film for his wife.

So, Paul Jensen and myself wrote this movie called *A Heritage of Blood*, a title we stole from a book about British horror films [*A Heritage of Horror*]. Well, it was just dreadful. I mean, she couldn't act, it was just awful. At one point I walked off the set and I wouldn't come back until they gave me another $10,000 — which they did, so I went back.

Now, while we're making that film, we're doing the contracts for *Dead End Street*. I'd got all these contracts; I was supposed to get twelve per cent of the gross of this, that and the other thing. Two or three months later they're stolen. They actually stole my own contracts whilst on the set of this other picture. I didn't care because (*a*) these assholes had mutilated *Dead End Street* — or *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell*, I didn't know it was then called *Dead End Street* — so bad, it's never going to come out; the dubbing is so shoddy no theatre is ever going to project this shit. It's never going to come out, I didn't give a fuck what happened to it. And (*b*), it

Spittoon continued from previous page

'The Mafia and Wall Street hopped in bed to finance the thing so they could put together a "serious" investment package. So far, so good. And I'm doing it right — SAG, union technicians, the whole bit.

'My friends at Screen Gems — where I had been editing together old Boris Karloff TV shows — get involved as money boys. Truthfully this bothered me from the start... I don't like taking money from friends. And if all does not go well, I am fucked in the business.

'The first day I'm shooting the thing Ed Cappillo, one of the so called producers, takes me aside and tells me they don't have the half million — or whatever — necessary to make the picture. In fact they only have about $130,000. My heart sank. But that I should "carry on" because the money will be coming. Of course it never would and it never did but I had a wife and a year-old baby so, against my better judgement I proceeded.

'I tore a good third of the pages out of the script. I reshaped the structure of the film entirely. The actors being SAG actors (all of them very good) can only work a few hours a day because they are commuting fifty miles to and from the city.

'I pull it off... sorta. I know it's no masterpiece, but it will fit in nicely on the lower half of a drive-in movie marquee and everybody should make money. And after all, my wife and child are eating and I have money for cigarettes.

'And then came post-production and the ruination of the momentum of my career.

'You must excuse me if I sound rather shrill evoking all of these memories. I have no detachment.

'As I think I told you in our interview, Jennie Joseph, a former street whore and porn star, started blowing and fucking everyone in sight with any "power" to manipulate herself into the cutting room as its primary editor. This of course was all my fault since I made no bones (no pun intended) about the fact that I thought the film a failure due to its budgetary shortcomings. Joseph jumped on that

Roger points. Filming *Spittoon*.

using the gambit that I was not objective and would ruin the picture.

'I walked and she proceeded to ruin the picture.

'As if her inept cutting wasn't enough the music she used was absolutely detrimental to the film, and the sound effects are misguided, misplaced and about as subtle as a schizophrenic sitting on your chest when you wake up naked in the middle of the night and he's got a meat cleaver in his right hand and a bottle of Cracker Jacks in the other. Cunt.

'After seeing her version of the film the negative disappeared! How and why I cannot tell. The "producers" had no negative insurance so they could not recoup. Pity.

'A video was struck though.

'The bitch wasn't content to ruin the slaughterhouse ending with inept cutting and music so misguided as to make the viewer actually wince — she took it upon herself to film her own cutaways (auteur that she was) and insert them into the film.

'The film opens in the Ansonia Hotel, home of numerous artists from Mahler to Toscannini to Caruso to Babe Ruth. I had hired a very good actor, a very old man — probably eighty — to play the desk clerk and the best scene in the movie, the one that gave it some sort of artistic credence was a right out-front dialogue scene between this old man and the German director. It was stunning. The old actor had taken a bus from Syracuse to New York just to do a three minute scene. I think that somehow it was the high point of his life in the theatre. The cunt cut it out entirely. That should sum it up and does. I could go on but you have better things to do.

'Now... Would you like to hear something truly odd? Of course you would. When I opened my email today there was a letter from Jennie Joseph, the twat that ruined the movie single handedly. I have not seen nor heard from her since 1980 when I sneered at her on 46th Street after a most disturbing screening of SPITTOON and walked away to a Hell of my own.'

Email from Roger, 29 Aug 2001

can't come out. It's just a mess. I don't care because I made $25,000 for like three weeks work or whatever, so I didn't really care and the rest is history. Three years later, there it is on 42nd Street and all over the place.

DK: Did the other film, *A Heritage of Blood*, ever come out?

RW: It came out. I hate to tell you the title… Remember the guy who I told you did the voiceover at the end of *Dead End Street* about me going to jail for a billion years?

MB: The suicide case?

RW: Yes, the suicide case. I really scared the shit out of Fenton, because he told me Bernie committed suicide and I said to him "What makes you think it was suicide?"
But that guy, Bernie Travis, he put his name down as the director, and that's shit! It's bad enough to steal, but are you going to put your name on shit?! And him and his wife put their names down as the writers. Fine with me, I would never allow my name on that garbage — or even [my pseudonyms] Richard Mahler or Victor Janos for that matter.

MB: What was it called?

RW [to Suzanne]: You found it in a lab, didn't you?

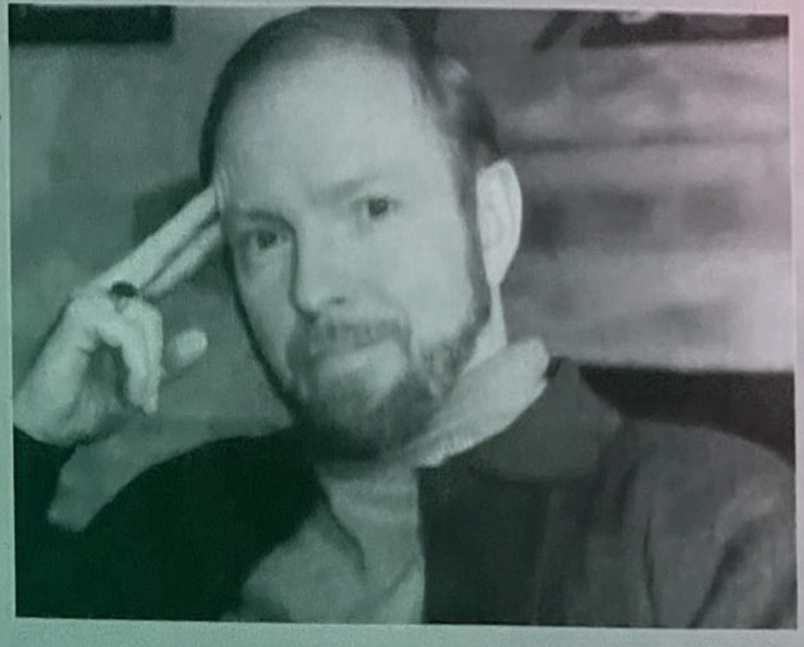
S: *Shadows of the Mind*.

RW: That's it! It's out…

S: I found the negative in a lab… I was looking for the negative of *Dead End Street* and found this. It's stored in a lab in New Jersey somewhere.

RW: It's a piece of trash. I mean even the porno films I did, I think they are well done for the most part. But this is just inept. It's just an abomination. The stories I could tell about that mess. But I learnt something in-

Photo courtesy: Ken Rouse



An Interview with KEN ROUSE

Extra in *Last House* and behind the scenes assistant

DAVID KEREKES: Can you tell us about your part in *Last House on Dead End Street*?

KEN ROUSE: Well, as far as being in front of the camera itself, I had a small part in a party scene as I remember. I got involved because at the time I had the bizarre ability to an imitation of Charles Laughton's Quasimodo, from *The Hunch-*

Ken Rouse playing the lead role of Sidney Bruhl in *Deathtrap*, for which he was nominated for Best Actor In A Comedy in the 2001 US Army-Europe Tournament of Play-

teresting on that set. Here's what I learnt: As I said, I wanted to make films when I was ten. I'm sixteen and I'm good. At twenty-two I'm real good. All of a sudden this asshole Fenton has got me directing this film that I wrote with Paul, and he's hired these assholes out of film school or visual arts who think they know everything and they know fucking nothing. But because they are all friends, they are like ganging up on me. "I want this... no, no I want this..." It's just like pulling teeth to get the shot you want, and then when you see it it's not the shot you want anyway. The only guy who was any good was this guy my age, Danny Canton — he was the one who filmed *Her Name Was Lisa*; he was the one that took me to Derby's office with the pornography and all that shit. He and I did a couple of films together.
Do you know William James? Henry James' brother? He had this saying: 'looking glass self.' You could be the most handsome man in the world, but if everybody around you tells you that you are fucking ugly, you will believe it. I would get all these people who knew nothing and I had to question: "Wait a minute. Do I know what I'm doing? Maybe these eighty-seven jerks out of NYU and out of the School of Visual Arts, maybe they know and I don't know?" I actually went through a sort of crisis which lasted a few months. Then I said, "No, they know fucking nothing!" But it happens.

DK: You have made films under the name 'Richard Mahler'?

RW: Yes. Richard as in Richard Wagner, and Mahler as in Gustav Mahler. I'm a big classical music fan.

DK: We've touched upon *Her Name Was Lisa*. Can you talk a bit about some of your other porn films?

RW: *Corruption* and *American Babylon* are two I had absolute, total control over. *Midnight Heat* is good, except for a really stupid

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back of Notre Dame. Roger was able to utilise this in a party scene... This is going from memory; I haven't seen any of this in about thirty years. In the scene we were all sitting around in this living room. I slowly cross the room and go into my hunchback mode, and then do the whipping — or the kicking or whatever it was — on this woman.

Had you known Roger long?

We had met in college. We had been in a couple of plays in the theatre there. I think we were in *Macbeth* together. I was always interested in film history and film production, and became involved in Paul Jensen's classes. From there I got to know Roger. In those days the student population was a lot smaller than it is now, so everybody knew everybody — at least to nod to. And of course the theatre group tended to be rather small, and those of us who were on the film side of it were an even smaller group yet.
That's how I got to meet Roger and got to be involved with the movie.

Roger was uncomfortable with the flogging scene because of this little boy who happened to be running around it...

There was a boy somewhere... I'm digging back thirty years here...

Do you recall if the flogging scene was originally part of a much larger scene?

We tended to shoot what we could whenever we could, whenever we could get people together to do the scene. Lots of times that was at night. Some of it was rather disjointed.

Do you have any idea how the scene came about? Did you say, "Roger, let me do my Quasimodo routine"?

sex scene at the beginning because I felt you needed it. I figured if the audience is stupid, then we got to do this to hold them.

DK: Apparently *Midnight Heat* has a scene where Jamie Gillis strangles a girl to death during sex...

RW: Right, you haven't seen it? Well, she's there to kill him. Jamie is a sort of intellectual hit man. He kills people mainly for intellectual reasons. And he always walks this fine edge. So he's fucking some mobster's wife, the mobster catches him and he's a dead man. He goes and hides in the Bowery. There is some great photography of the Bowery which is really nice with beautiful women, lots of bums and shit. And he's holed up in this hotel. He calls two whores from an escort service, senses something strange about one of the girls and has her stay with him. The whole thing is back and forth between them for an hour-and-a-half. But he knows in the end that she has come to kill him, so kills her first and that's it.

MB: Do all the porn movies have a plot?

RW: Oh yes, absolutely. *Corruption* is Wagner's *Das Rheingold*.

MB: The whole cycle in three hours?

RW: I wanted to do that.

DK: You used Jamie Gillis again in that film. What was he like to work with?

RW: I like Jamie. In porno you find that outside of a couple of people, nobody can act,

JAMIE GILLIS REMEMBERS

'Sure, I recall the films. Watkins was one of the very few serious guys in the business, so working for him was fun in the most satisfying sense.'

Email from Jamie Gillis, Jan 30, 2002

No, I think he just said there's a party scene, and Quasimodo just happened to fit into the bizarreness of it. I also did some stuff behind the camera. I helped out with filming, and Roger and Ken Fisher and I were involved in the drilling of the cow's eyeball that constituted a special effect in one scene. Let me tell you, a cow's eyeball is a lot tougher to drill than you think. I mean, the three of us were standing there... one of us holding the eyeball, one of us operating the drill, and one of us operating the camera. Trying not to put the drill through our hands.

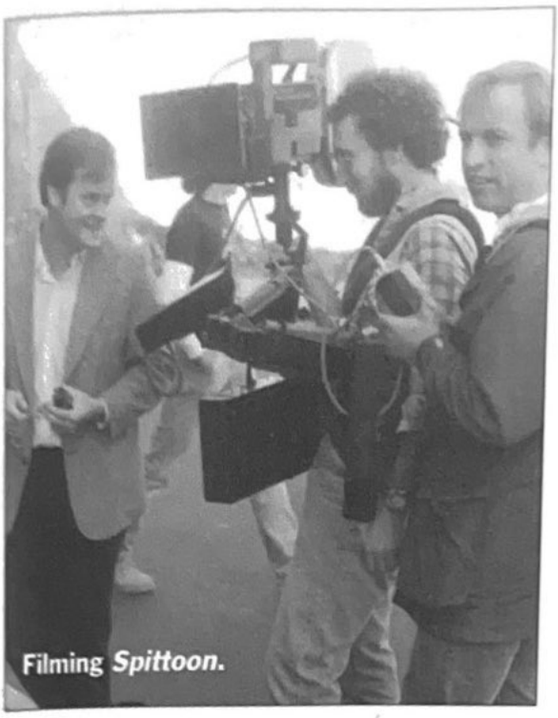
It was frustrating trying to get it right, but there was quite a bit of humour in it, too.

Ken Rouse in Quasimodo mode, flogging the black-faced Mrs Palmer.

What was shooting like — the atmosphere on the set?

We were all very serious about what we did, because we knew that there was only a finite amount of money available for film and stuff like that. One thing that perhaps helped was that we were all pretty much friends, and so that it just seemed to go smoother than if you'd done it with a bunch of strangers.

I think all of us loved what we did, that's why we were all theatre majors or did a lot with the theatre. I wound up having like five courses with Paul Jensen — that's like one



Filming *Spittoon*.

nobody can remember a line and they're all so high they just want to go home anyway. What would happen is I would put somebody in a close-up and then tell them, "Right, repeat after me..." And they would repeat each line after me and then I'd cut it all together. You'd have no technique, you'd just have static shots that are shitty. But what I started doing was realising who could do what and wrote films around them. Jamie was good, a good actor, I liked him. Vanessa Del Rio could act, and a few others also.

DK: What was she in?

RW: She was in *Her Name Was Lisa*, *Corruption*, and *Spittoon* — an R-rated film that she's very good in actually.
So I wrote *Corruption* based on *Das Rheingold*, and Jamie was out in California and — I thought this was kind of cool — he took a bus to New York to be in it. He said "Roger, if anybody's doing anything in this shit eating joint, it's you, so I want to do this." He wore the same suit in both pictures which I bought off the rack at Alexander's for about $39.

DK: If you know Jamie Gillis is in a porn film, you can generally assume that some

whole semester, and my college course was accounted for by the courses with Paul. So we were all quite serious about it. Looking back at how things went in university, I know I started out being a rather chequered student — not that I couldn't do it, it's just that I saw something I liked doing a lot more. For instance, we would be severely put upon if a 'normal' job expected us to put in anything like the hours we were working in *Last House* — [sarcastically] "Oh yeah, sure, let's do it tonight at midnight..."

Have you appeared in any films since *Last House on Dead End Street*?

No, much as I would I would have liked to. I've been living the last the last thirteen years over here in Germany. I got involved again with the theatre groups, so I've stayed in acting — if you will — in the US Army Europe Theatre programme. Even though I'm retired from the army now. I've also done three or four voice-overs for computer games: One was called *Jack Orlando*, and I'm trying to think what the name of the one we just did was... I'm supposed to be some sort of star-ship commander. It's really quite a bit of fun. With the script, you're visualising what's going on and you're saying the lines in different ways and thinking to yourself, "Well, gee, in some way or form, people will not know me but they'll know my voice".

Do you recall *Last House* playing in theatres anywhere?

No. It was one of those things when you think back afterwards, "Whatever happened with that?" I had heard that, rather than *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell* — which I think was the working title — the film had been released as *Last on Dead End Street*.
I wound up in the latter part of 1977 going

girl is going to be mistreated somewhere down the line.

RW: I've never seen him in anything. I must tell you, I'd never seen any pornography *per se* before I made this stuff.

MB: He's in all those Gonzo type pictures nowadays...

RW: I like Jamie, he's alright. I like Vanessa. But they're in a different world.

DK: In what respect?

RW: Well, how about this: all they do is fuck and nobody cares anymore. We were always trying to think of new ways to fuck or do something. Jamie was telling me he was living with Seka — you know Seka? She is this big, blonde porn star. He says to me, "Man, I think I'm losing my mind... Lately, to get off she gets on her knees and I put her head in the toilet and just keep sticking her head in the fucking water while I jerk off. And when I fucking come, I flush the toilet." [laughs]

MB: They must be jaded to get that far...

RW: Yeah, but it's like... half the guys on the set can't get a hard-on, none of them come, it's just a big joke. I remember there was this great soundman — actually he does normal movies but he was a friend of mine so he would do the porn sound. Dale Whitman, very good, excellent sound guy. We were shooting something, I forget what, and we were sitting around waiting for the camera to be changed and around us there are three guys jerking off soft dicks, two women with dildos up their asses fingering themselves, and he goes, "Roger, what the fuck kind of life are we living? There are three guys jerking off in the corner, there are girls fingering themselves over here, we are all waiting for a camera magazine to be loaded — let's just get out of here!" I think that was probably the

WATKINS

back on active duty in the army and going to other places. So everybody that I was in the film with I haven't seen now for twenty-five or thirty years. Which is one reason why it's been fun chatting with Roger by e-mail.
The reason that I found out about the whole thing with *Last House* was total serendipity: I had sat down to watch a DVD of Karloff's *The Mummy* when the credit 'Film commentary by Paul Jensen' came up... I dug Paul's number out later that night, called him and said, "You'll never guess why I called!" And he said, "You talked to Roger?" I said, "Er... no," and then he explained what had been happening with *Last House*.

There's really quite a buzz around the film, what with this new DVD...

I'm looking forward to it. I've told people in the past that I was in a movie once, and of course they are like, "Yeah, right!" I tell them it was made in college and it was fun, and I think we had hoped that we'd all wind up being household names someday. I guess in a sense we are.

What can you tell me about 'bowling for souls'?

Oh God, Roger! I wasn't sure if he was going to mention that. We were out one night and it was really rather strange. We were having a couple of beers in this one place... we always used to like the old song 'Moonlight Vermont' and this place happened to have it on the jukebox. Roger and I could get away with going there even as college kids. I don't know if they have the same situation in England — you know, the townie bars and the college bars? But since Roger and I knew how to act around people without behaving like your typical snotty college kid, the locals and the older generation would tolerate us. Any-

ROUSE

last time I involved Dale!

DK: Did you give the actors in the porn films a script?

RW: Yes.

DK: Did they stick to it?

RW: Yeah, word for word I would say, pretty much.

DK: That's a novelty in itself nowadays.

RW: I think so. I think it was then, too.

DK: *American Babylon*...

RW: I made that with my own money. I like that film. I can't even find a good tape of it now. I have a bootleg. It's interesting to me; it's about boredom. It's about two men who sit around bored watching pornography. Basically that's it. I kind of like it. I think the

Roger Watkins, 1975.

way, we were in this place one night and somehow we had this individual convinced that we were bowling for souls. She came to me and pleaded, "Don't let him take my soul or anything!" *She doesn't believe this, does she?* I've got a lamb to the slaughter if she does! I said, "Jeez. See, because I've got the blonde hair and he's got the dark hair, there's not too much I can do for you until the sun comes up. He's got all the power now, but don't worry, as soon as the sun clears the horizon, we'll get you squared away."
I don't know if the deal was supposed to be like Saint Peter and Lucifer out for a couple of beers or something.

ON KEN ROUSE

'He's one of the few people I've actually missed over the years. A supremely funny guy with a damned good heart. When we were shooting LAST HOUSE my car battery was on its deathbed and Ken would drive to my place anytime day or night to give me a jump. One night, just for kicks, I held the battery cables together in front of his face. Sparks flying about, sizzle sounds and Ken's screaming everywhere. I enjoyed that.'

Email from Roger, July 12, 2001

An interesting position to be in.

Yeah, to think that a person may have actually believed it.

Okay, here's another one: You, Roger and Ken Fisher drive to Binghampton to meet Nicholas Ray...

Yes, we did, and we drove down there in my car (a car was probably one of the greatest commodities to have back then!). When we got there it was very, very strange because Nick Ray seemed to be either very tired or very inebriated, and there were a bunch of

last shot is an eight minute static, b&w shot of these two forlorn guys sitting near a window in a bar listening to 'Glory Glory Hallelujah' or something.

MB: Was the title influenced by *Hollywood Babylon*?

RW: No. There was a porn series that made a lot of money — *Babylon Pink*, *Babylon Yellow*, Babylon whatever. *American Babylon* capitalised on all that, but I had written it in a more imaginative way.

DK: It has been described as the "last great adult film to come out of New York".

RW: That was done in about 1985.

DK: It seems that you retired from porno after making *Decadence* in 1988.

RW: That was a videotape, I've never even seen it. I was there to do the cutting, I don't remember much about it.

DK: Have you been involved in the industry since then?

RW: Yeah, oh yeah. I'll go on from 1985. In one fell swoop what happened was I lost my money, my partners ran off with more money, my wife and I split and... what else happened? A lot of shit. I wrote a screenplay called *Hurtgen* with a guy named Srausberg which wound up being on TV a couple of years ago. Hurtgen was a WWII battle...
When I was like seven-years-old, my father wouldn't watch much on TV, he would watch sports and this thing called *The Twentieth Century*, which was about WWII. One day he was watching this and I said to him "What was the worst place you were ever in, in WWII?" He never talked about the war, but I knew he'd got a uniform in the closet. He just said, "Hurtgen." That's all he said. Never said another word about it, he never did. So I started thinking, "Well, this is interesting."

hangers-on. Roger said to me, "Whatever you do, don't eat or drink anything — it's liable to have LSD in it!" And I'm going, "Wh... *what?!*" I think finally I found a glass and drank tap water, after making sure I wiped out the glass so that there was no 'residue'! But it was rather strange, because here's someone who had directed these famous movies we'd grown up with, and instead of the regular, you know — "Should I have worn a jacket and tie?" — it was almost like going to a *Last House on Dead End Street* environment. His house was kind of in the middle of nowhere, too.

What's your most overriding memory of *Last House on Dead Street*?

I remember we went down to New Jersey to dub it. That was interesting because here we were in a studio in or just outside of Princeton, a professional-type sound studio which was completely different to the environment in which we had made the film. We had to be on our game and get it done, as once again it was costing a fair bit of money. I remember Roger would always come in and put on this Bob Dylan song and turn up the volume, the same song every morning — that was my wake-up call. It didn't take him long to twig to the fact that I could spend most of my time living like a vampire, staying up 'til five in the morning and then sleeping forever. We had to be up at like seven or eight to be at the studio to do our dubbing. He would usually make sure there was coffee on, so there'd be a cup of coffee to hit the road with. I don't think the film was dubbed to the point I ever wound up seeing the completed thing. I only saw the parts that I needed to dub. But as for a movie environment, I never got to go to the theatre and see it.

Any other memories?

One of the most enduring images from *Last House on Dead End Street* — Terry Hawkins forces Palmer to 'direct' his movie.

For me it was a rewarding experience because I was doing something that I enjoyed to do — which was acting, even though I had this small part and was helping behind the scenes. I enjoyed film production and I wanted to see it come through. And knowing and liking Roger, I wanted to make sure he did the best job.

When the *Friday the 13th* movies and all that started, I remember telling someone, "Hell, we did that before there were slasher movies. We did that in college." I would like to think that since *Last House* did make it into theatres, that maybe we did inspire the whole slasher movie thing...

That's about it. I'm sorry I couldn't have given you more insight.

Not at all. I fully appreciate it.

Steve [Sweet] was one of the friends I used to play poker with, in addition to the plays and stuff. It's been really neat talking to these people that you were friends with. As I'm sure you know, everything tends to splinter after college. It's strange that ninety percent of us who were theatre majors wound up doing something totally different as a career. I certainly never expected to put twenty years on active duty with the army.

How did that come about, if you don't mind me asking?

Well, I was in the reserve. The job situation in the mid seventies wasn't all that wonderful in the States and I needed some kind of job. Then they started a programme for recruiting the reserves, and I put in an application. There was a panel that you went before and they asked you questions and things. I was brought on and wound up being very, very successful. I got my promotions and was a Sergeant Major when I retired. ■

All my friends had fathers at D-Day and Pearl Harbour and all this shit, and my father is at Hurtgen! I thought maybe he was nuts or something and he'd hallucinated a battle [laughs]. You never find a reference to it, ever. In 1987, when all the chaos was going on around me, I walked into this little store in Nyack and there is this wooden model of a soldier all blown to shit. Underneath it read: 'Hurtgen Forest, 1944.' I thought what the fuck is this, wow! So I found out from the lady who owned the store that this guy named Eddie Strausberg does these models out of love. There's no money in it for him. I called him up and said, "What do you know about the Battle of Hurtgen Forest?" And he says, "What do *you* know?" I said "Well, I know my father was there." He says "Your father was at Hurtgen Forest? I'll meet you at O'Donohue's bar." Sure enough he comes in, he's going nuts, and asks me if I knew anything at all about this battle. He tells me it was one of the most devastating battles ever fought in the history of warfare. Tens of thousands of men killed in three days in the middle of this forest — all uphill terrain, constant artillery back and forth, fighting in the middle of the winter. So I said "Let's write a movie about it." He knows his military history and he can get us into West Point Library and things like this, and we write this thing called *Hurtgen*. Right away it comes together, within two or three weeks. I'm sort of excited but I'm mature enough at this point in time to know that things that come together this quickly, fall apart equally as fast. Sure enough the Stock Market crashes — what was it? October or November 1987? — the whole thing went right out of the window. This friend of mine who we met in a bar in New York — he'd been a gangster — he says to me, "Listen, we can do your picture but you've got to make some compromises." I said, "What do you mean?" He goes "Well, we got to have women in the film." "No, we're not gonna have women..."

MB: Frauleins...

RW: Yeah, right. He goes, "Well, you don't understand..." Now Eddie was waiting for me outside because I had other business with this guy. He goes, "There is $500,000 cash for you and your partner." I said, "No, I'm not going to do it, forget about it. You want me to write about shit I'm not going to do it."

MB: Did he want you to stick some porn in there?

BORIS KARLOFF

'It was, I believe, the summer of 1979, possibly 78. In any case it was the year the New York Yankees were twelve-and-a-half out in early September and they won the pennant after a one game playoff with Boston during which Bucky Dent hit a homerun allowing the Yanks to win 1–0. I was in a bar called Costello's on 44th Street at the time, just down the block from EUE Screen Gems.

'I don't remember how I met this guy. He had purchased the rights to a TV show Boris Karloff hosted called THE VEIL. Don't know whether it was US or British. Anyway it wasn't an editing job at all, really, just a bit of tightening up and stringing together three episodes at a time in order to mass produce feature length videos.

'I chose EUE Screen Gems for the job hoping I could meet some interesting people. I did just that. The President (George Cooney) and Vice President (Nick Bavaro) became fast friends of mine. Right up until they lost about $60,000.00 on SPITTOON. Although I did write them a letter explaining what led up to the debacle, I haven't seen them since.

'Here it is two decades later and the tapes are available through FILMFAX here in America. I believe the ad starts, "Sometime back in the seventies someone took the time to put together...", or words to that effect. I liked reading the ad and knowing I was the one that took the time. I was supposed to get $1 per Karloff tape sold from the shitball who contracted me. Never did. I didn't really mind since, for once in my life, I gouged the hell out of somebody well before he had the chance to do it to me.

'I recall that Don Buck, a major big shot at Screen Gems wrote an awfully nice letter of introduction. I never used it but I believe it's around somewhere.'

Email from Roger, Aug 8, 2001

***Last House* carnage. Suzy is branded, Nancy Palmer is carved up with a scalpel.**

RW: Like in the middle of WWII! Nurses getting fucked in the minefield... it was awful. So Eddie's looking in and this guy says, "Who's that guy staring at me?" I said, "That's my partner." So he said "Well, he's got something to say about it, get him over here." Eddie comes over. He gives him the whole thing, the $500,000 spiel, blah, blah, blah. Eddie goes "Why would you want to do that?" The guy replies, "It's not me. My partners are Jewish and they hate Nazis and they want this film made because they hate Nazis." And Eddie goes, "I'm Jewish and you can tell those Jews to go fuck themselves!" [laughs] Half a million dollars that man turned down —both of us — and I knew he would. So HBO had it and they wrote to me saying they liked the script, it was powerful, but that they already had another WWII thing they were considering. Fine...

In 1998 I'm watching HBO and I see a preview for a film... That's it! They ripped me off! These motherfuckers, they ripped me off. And it was the same script... it was eighty per cent the same. They just ripped it off.

DK: Did they keep the title?

RW: It's called *When Trumpets Fade*, which I think is a shitty title. But I was pleased because we never wrote it for the money, never, and now the battle is remembered, millions of people have seen that and they know what Hurtgen Forest is about. They know what happened. In terms of the tone, HBO got it pretty well. It was the military facts that they fucked up. But y'know, I can live with that. There's no women in it and it's bleak and I liked it, I liked it quite a bit. We were going to sue them but we didn't. These copyright lawyers in New York City knew we had a case, especially with the letter from HBO, the copyrighted screenplay and everything, but it got to the point where they wanted too much money. They were out of their level with HBO. HBO has 500 lawyers. This is like three guys in a broom closet. But I was always proud that it got done. Like I said, I never did that for the money.

My father was funny, he said, "Well, you should have sold the fucking thing. Take the $500,000. What's wrong with you guys?" This is about him really.

DK: What can you tell us about *Obituaries*?

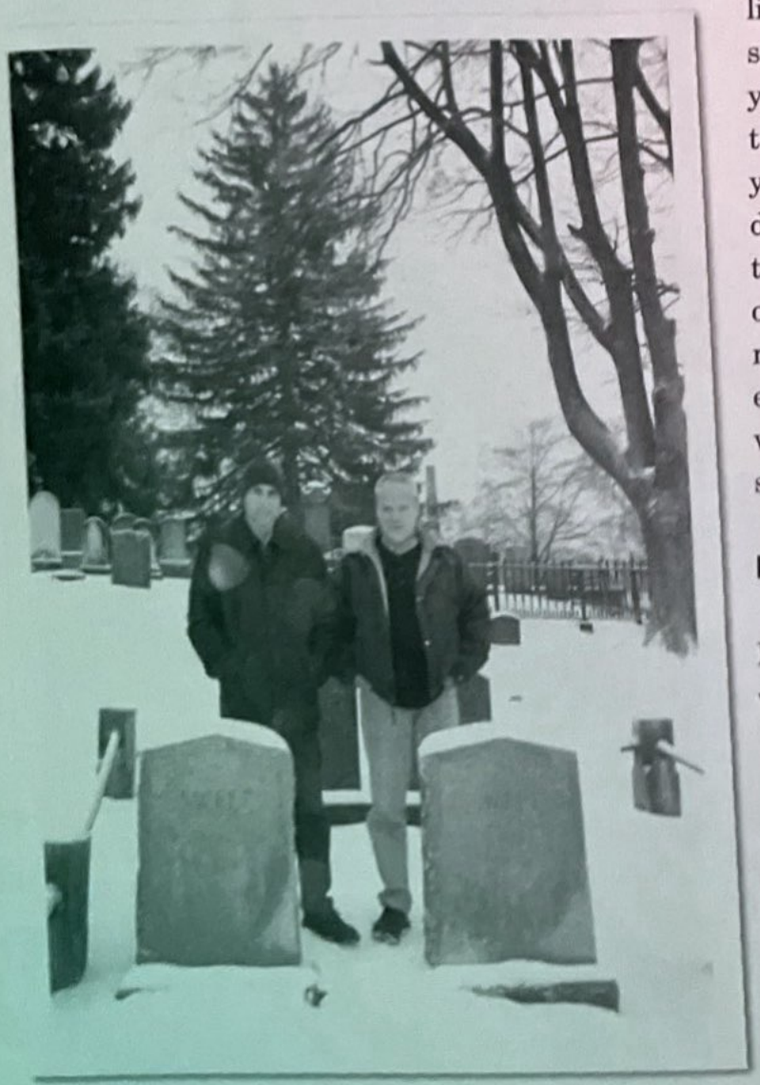
RW: Ah, Harry Nilsson. That was after *American Babylon*. I just decided I didn't want to do porn anymore. I think I'd written *Obituaries* around 1985. It was not a bad little script; sort of a comedy. The plot concerns a guy who writes headlines for the likes of the *National Enquirer* — these non-newspaper tabloids that print stupid headlines like 'Baby Born With Eight Heads'... But at the same time he lives down in St Mark's Place and he cuts out obituaries that appeal to him as being a little off-kilter. He sticks these into a big fish tank, and at one point just reaches in and grabs one at random and decides he's going to find out about the murder behind

this particular death. He winds up with this horribly demented family called the Stoats, investigating this murder... and it turns into this really strange, strange thing. Anyway, the script is finished and I'm at this bar having a drink. I'm talking to the barman who is a cocaine dealer, and he says to me, "What do you think of Harry Nilsson?" I said "Oh, I love his music. I've got about fifteen of his albums." He goes, "Well, I deal coke to him and I heard he wants to get into the movies. Why don't you give me your script and see what happens?" I thought, well this is really stupid, but you have to follow these things. So I gave him a copy of the script and sure enough, about three weeks later the phone rings and it's Harry Nilsson. He's in this bar down the road and wants to meet me.

He loved my screenplay and wanted to buy it. He kept optioning it for me. I got like three years' worth of options — every month he would give me a cheque for like $2,500. Finally he did buy it, but that's like two years later when my marriage has crumbled, my health has gone, and it's just a big mess of drugs, alcohol and debauchery. Also I hung out with Terry Southern, who I had very little respect for. I don't think he ever had an original thought of his own. Even his novels are co-written with other people. I just never liked him. Then at some point, there was a little rift because somebody called me up and said, "Roger, do you read *US Magazine*? Well, you'd better get it because on page nineteen... I'm not going to tell you because you've got a bad temper. Just go get it." So I did and there is Harry and Terry saying how they wrote *Obituaries*... that really pissed me off and I got into a fist fight in the bar. I was mad. I was furious because everything I've ever done has been ripped off, basically. It was after that Nilsson actually bought the screenplay from me.

DK: And you remained friends with him?

RW: Harry went back to California, but he would come to New York frequently. He



Roger & Me.
Left: David Kerekes and Roger Watkins in the cemetery at Tarrytown. Right: Mikita Brottman, Roger Watkins and Suzanne Rowe.

would always stop by and we'd go and get high or something. On his website, they've got this synopsis of his and Southern's... it's an abomination, it's an embarrassment to me to even be associated with that. It's so amateur and precisely what two drug addicts would come up with at three o'clock in the morning. The original screenplay was nothing like that. But at least Harry paid me.

Everybody Harry met wanted to just kick the shit out of him. The day I'm picking up a cheque from Harry for $75,000 — he's already given me all kinds of money, optioning it and optioning it — Eddie Strausberg comes with me and we're getting loaded and we're all getting along pretty good. Harry and I start talking about William Burroughs. Harry says something about the fact that he fucks little boys and Eddie is like, "*Huh?*" Harry goes, "Yes, he likes to fuck little boys. Over in Marrakech you can do that." Eddie takes this reefer from his pocket, which Harry had given to him earlier, breaks it, throws it on the floor and goes "I ought to kick the shit out of you right here in this fucking bar." So everybody wanted to beat Nilsson up... it was just unbelievable.

DK: I can believe it — having to hear 'Without You' every time you go to the supermarket.

RW: My career's been odd. These two guys out of Florida wanted me to do two horror films. They hired me to write and direct both, and they sent me $20,000 to start and shit. Now this would be about 1997. But what happens is, one guy catches the other guy fucking his wife, and everything falls apart. That was just my luck, you know: I'm ready to do two films in Florida, they might not be the greatest films in the world but it's the kind of films I like — low-budget stuff — and it just falls apart.

DK: You say you've already got *Last House on Dead End Street Part II* already scripted. Is that true?

RW: No. Suzanne makes me say that. I'm not sure I have anything to say on the subject.

HARRY NILSSON & TERRY SOUTHERN

'My partner for two years was a rock singer named Harry Nilsson. Do you know him? I replaced John Lennon as his partner in debauchery. He bought a pretty good script from me called OBITUARIES and utterly ruined it with born collaborator Terry Southern, a writer I can in no way respect...

'The drinks were Strawberry Daiquiris and were christened Milkshakes. Too sweet for me but Harry and Terry puked them up on a few bar room floors while I stood by laughing...

'Terry Southern was a sycophantic, plagiarising, semi talented mediocrity, born collaborator piece of shit. You may quote me if you like.' *[After I mentioned to Roger he had a namecheck in a new biography of Southern called A GRAND GUY: THE ART AND LIFE OF TERRY SOUTHERN (by Lee Hill; pub: Bloomsbury 2001).]*

Emails from Roger, Jan 7 & Nov 12, 2001

S: If someone gave him the money to do it, of course he would do it.

DK: The scene in *Dead End Street* where you attack Palmer, yelling "I'm directing this fucking movie!" really looks like you are beating him up.

RW: I know, but I wasn't. I couldn't. He was a professor of mine. ■

Visit the only site AUTHORIZED by Roger Watkins, Victor Janos, Richard Mahler and Ray Hicks:

www.necrophagia.com and click on KILLAWAT

Available titles: *Last House On Dead End Street*, *Her Name Was Lisa*, *Spittoon*, early and extremely rare titles such as *Ron Rico* and *Requiem*, *Corruption*, *Midnight Heat*, documentaries and MUCH MUCH MORE.

"BEAUTY CO-EXISTS WITH EVIL!" *Ron Rico is Coming*

by John Szpunar

A dialogue with **ROGER WATKINS** and **PHIL AISTON** on **RON RICO**, a pre-**LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET** short feature

Regular 8mm film is fed into an old Bell and Howell. Green leader runs through the works before the image settles. Kodak Eastman film, vivid despite its years, spools forward. Then, a flash of light. Religious statues fill the screen. St Francis of Assisi holds the baby Jesus as Mary Magdalene smiles in whorish delight. Blood-red sperm drops from the infant saviour. It slowly crawls across a tiled floor toward Magdalene — then between her legs. A woman screams.

ROGER WATKINS: I made *Ron Rico* in 1968. I think the whole religious thing was unavoidable for me. My whole Catholic school background and my obsession with death left me no choice.

A church. Jesus with extended arms. A slow pan across a suburban wasteland takes us to a junkyard. An armless dwarf in a corduroy overcoat stands alone amongst the wreckage. Opening titles slowly fade in and out. Red calligraphy bleeds over a cloudless blue sky: 'Philip Aiston in *Ron Rico*...'

PHIL AISTON: I met Roger in the fall of 1968. I was in my second year of college; I believe he was a junior.

RW: It was junior year. Me and my roommate Pat Clark got a dormitory room. On our first day there, we got a knock on the door. I opened the door and there was Phil, looking pretty much like Ron Rico, except he was taller. He was sort of bobbing — you could tell he was into drugs and into weird shit. He lived right next door to us.

PA: I don't know what I was majoring in. I don't know now, and certainly didn't know then! I was aware that Roger was studying film, as was my roommate Stevie. I think it was their initial connection that progressed into friends collaborating on his filmmaking. We had seen some of his earlier work and were impressed with his vision.

RW: Stevie Meyer! He was a very intelligent, somewhat talented filmmaker. Actually, he took one of the most remarkable shots I ever saw in my life. It was so sad. He was into 8mm filmmaking like I was, but nowhere near

as seriously. But he was good. One winter, he was doing this film about his father. He took father to Times Square on Christmas morning. It was completely barren, empty of everything. And he shot all these great scenes. There was this one shot of his father, shot at sunset — it had all that orange light. He was coming up the stairs, out of a subway and you could just see the defeat in his father's shoulders. Like his life was over.

Anyway, the title came from Ron Rico rum. The rum itself had a big ad campaign at the time. It showed a bottle of rum and it said, "Ron Rico is Coming." So I thought that was kind of funny. It was like, "*The Birds* is coming." So I started hanging little pieces of paper all over the dormitory that said, "*Ron Rico* is Coming." In other words, the ad campaign existed before the movie. And Ron Rico was Phil's favourite brand of rum.

PA: I was on acid. I don't recall that Ron Rico was my favourite rum. But orange sunshine was my favourite acid!

RW: I fell in love with Phil's face. And his Ron Rico character. It was *his* character; he made it up. One night, we were tripping our brains out, and there was a knock on the door. There's Phil with his shoes tied to his knees and his little coat on. And his sleeves tied in front of him.

A young blonde woman, clad in a tight black skirt walks through an empty field. Ron Rico nods his head and smiles. She continues to walk toward him. Close-up of long legs in black nylons. They kiss and Rico swoons in triumph.

RW: I think, at the time, I really didn't believe in relationships. I feel this way now as well. I just believe that women are tragic in the end.

A series of edits follows the blonde as she walks away from Rico. He closes his eyes and faints.

RW: The film was cut in camera. It was much easier for me to do it that way.

PA: We would do an occasional re-take if one of us fucked up. I think, overall, we shared in Roger's vision of his creation, and could 'act' the vibes.

RW: In my professional career, it's very difficult for me to do things the way they're supposed to be done because I want to pick up the camera and just run around and do everything. But of course, you can't.

Ron Rico stands in front of a church, looking up at a statue of Jesus. A priest sits on the steps in his vestments. He bears a strong resemblance to Hitler.

RW: A priest came over to us when we were filming that scene. He goes, "What are boys doing?!?" I said, "Well, I'm filming a movie. It's about how if Jesus ever came back to earth, nobody would recognise him." I thought to myself, "Genetically, he *is* the son of baby Jesus." I remember the priest saying, "Well, I think that's a good idea, son. You just keep filming." If he knew I was having nuns masturbate...

PA: At the time my head was so fucked up — I could appreciate the images then, but perhaps now, after all of these years, I see man's search for meaning, his relationship vis-à-vis society, 'God' and ultimately, alienation and rejection of life.

RW: But *this* Jesus, this little Ron Rico here, he's more than happy to be seduced by woman, gambling... anything, really!

PA: I don't know. It's like the joke, "What's the movie about?" I don't know, man, an hour!

A young nun lights a cigarette from the flame of a candle. She takes a drag, lies down in bed, stares at the ceiling and spreads her legs. She takes the candle out of its holder — an empty wine bottle

— and begins to masturbate. An omniscient mannequin looks down at her with lifeless eyes.

RW: The whole film — except for the masturbating nun and the junkyard scenes — was made in one day. It was like a two-day thing. Now that I look back, I think, "Rog, you were doing pretty good there!"

PA: Stevie found the mannequin being thrown out from a local department store and brought it back to the dorm. Of course, most of us were horny little bastards, so it inflamed our gonads.

Ron Rico sits on a crowded street corner, selling pencils. His attention turns to the blonde. She stands at corner and smiles at him. Rico smiles back, his armless sleeves flapping in the wind. An umbrella is tucked into his belt, a black fur hat sits on his head.

PA: My costume was a group effort, designed to enhance the 'stature' of the little character.

RW: It's funny. There was a day when Phil came in dressed as Ron Rico. Me and Stevie Meyer kept adding to it. Stevie took an umbrella and put it down the belt and I put the hat on and tied a scarf around it, like he was a little bishop.

A blind man and a hunchback struggle down the street toward Ron Rico. The blind man paws at the blonde as the hunchback attacks.

RW: Once people agree to do a film, it feeds into their ego. And the film begins to exist on a separate level than their own reality. So when you ask them to do something for the film, they'll do it. A guy named Craig Lesser played the hunchback. Father Adolph was played by Pat Clark. Debbie Steckmest played the blonde.

PA: We were all like Ken Kesey's group of Merry Pranksters. Craig and Pat were intelligent, fun people. I think Debbie was more of a peripheral player, one of Roger's groupies.

Ron Rico follows his attackers into the woods. A strange, bearded mystic holds court. The hunchback, the blind man, the blonde, and Father Adolph gather around him. The mystic cures the hunchback and the blind man of their afflictions. Father Adolph scoffs. Ron Rico, however, hobbles forward. The mystic places his hands on Rico's head. The dwarf's eyes grow wide as he miraculously sprouts an arm...

RW: If you look at Phil, he's a wise ass. He's pretty sure of himself. It's, "Hey, I'm *Ron Rico...*"

Ron Rico decides to make use of his new arm. The mystic deals a hand of cards and Rico smiles to himself. He antes up and wins. Again and again. The blonde smiles and they collect his winnings. Suddenly, the blonde's smile turns to greed. She knocks Ron Rico to the ground and leaves him penniless. The prodigal son returns alone to his junkyard and gazes at the sky, searching for sanctifying grace.

PA: Life is funny and sad at the same time. Beauty co-exists with evil. The late sixties were a time of great turmoil. The tragedies of Vietnam, students being gunned down... As Mick Jagger put it, "The time was right for violent revolution." Students world-wide were in the streets. We were hearing Dylan, the Beatles, The Doors. We were all dealing with our own private tragedies and searching for meaning.

RW: I guess the message is that the world's a shitty place and women are whores. Of course, men are whores too. Better yet, as Shandonaise says, "Women are pigs and men are animals." Or are men pigs and women animals? I can never keep it straight... ■

selected filmography

Masque of the Red Death

no title on print silent wr/dir: Roger Watkins Filmed in a basement. Makeshift pendulum in middle of the room. Two kids are fighting beneath it, until one falls victim to its (wooden) blade. One kid is evidently the bad guy because he is introduced wearing a skull mask. Made by Roger, aged ten.

[*no title*]

silent wr/dir: Roger Watkins Inside a church stands a statue of a saint with a red balloon attached to it. Courtesy of stop-motion, the balloon drops to the floor and scuttles across to a statue of the Virgin Mary, whereupon it bursts. A scream. Ends.

Requiem

1968 silent wr/dir: Roger M Watkins A snow covered cemetery. A boy is talking to a young man (Philip Aiston), before a dark-haired woman in a fur coat leads the young man away and into bed. When he awakes the young man has a shave, gets dressed and leaves for Dutch's salloon with the woman. He knocks back several beers as the girl chats to a bearded man in sunglasses. Drunk, the young man shoots some pool and puts some money in the jukebox. He observes the girl and her new friend getting on like a house on fire. He sees them kiss and has to go to the bathroom to be sick, before passing out. Cut to the young man with his new pool buddy. Suddenly the pool buddy is gone leaving only the boy from the beginning of the picture covered in blood, so too the bearded guy in sunglasses. Running to a church, the boy cries silently "Help me!" The young man tries to pray in the church but is driven out by images of the crucifixion. He stops momentarily to play in a playground before running some more.

"My best film," says the Watkins.

Ron Rico

1969 silent wr/dir: Roger Watkins In a scrapyard stands Ron Rico (Phil Aiston), a man with no arms or legs. An umbrella is pinned to his coat. A good-looking blonde girl approaches who starts to kiss and hug him. When she leaves he falls over. Now beneath a crucifix, Rico examines the nails in the hands of Christ and encounters a forlorn priest (with a Hitler moustache) on the steps of a church. Images of mannequins and Aubrey Beardsley's *John and Salome*. A nun lights a cigarette before lying down and (offscreen) masturbating with a bottle. *Is this a fantasy of the priest?* The blonde girl from earlier reappears and smooches with Rico some more, before leaving him with a tub containing pencils. A sign at his feet reads 'Wanna Buy A Pencil?' A couple of strange hippie people with deformities wander down the street, beat up Rico and smash his pencils. Rico returns to the church where the priest still sits forlorn on the steps. The blonde girl is listening to a bearded man as the priest looks on. The hippies reappear. Both are cured of their disabilities. Rico ambles into view. The bearded man turns his attention to him now, shakes him, and Rico sprouts arms but no legs. Rico attempts to join a card game played by the hippies, the girl, the priest and Jesus. Jesus wins hands down. The girl collects the chips, slaps Rico and leaves. Rico is back in the scrapyard. Ends. Made by Watkins aged nineteen. See page 136.

Amputee Grand Prix

1972 silent no title on print wr/dir: Roger Watkins A TV chat show. The first guest wheels himself on in a wheelchair (or herself — it's difficult to tell) and relates a story which commences in a hospital. The guest states how, in the hospital, he is visited by his fairy godmother (or a vampire) and suddenly, with the loss of his arms, finds himself in a wheelchair. There is a lengthy shot of him rolling down a road wearing a helmet, goggles and a rubber chicken. Cars pass by. Eventually he reaches other people dependent on wheelbased transportation. They include a person in a shopping trolley propelling themselves with a broom, another wearing a giant picture of Ghandi, and a third

sporting a pair of wings. One guy who doesn't have a trolley has no head. They all line up for a race. When it begins, the guy with no head is left to hover around the starting line. The man in the wheelchair reaches a shoe repair shop and calls the hospital. A no-good contestant attempts to pick off the other racers with a rifle, until he suffers a stroke. The TV chat show over, the man in the wheelchair returns to the hospital and is reunited with the fairy godmother/vampire, who proudly exhibits a surgically detached appendage. They wheel off together.

Black Snow

1971 wr/dir: Roger Watkins Watkins: *"I made this film called* Black Snow. *Actually when I showed it to Nick [Ray], he thought it was just... it was not anything, it was atypical of my work. It wasn't narrative film. I set out to prove how easy it was to be avant-garde so I made* Black Snow *to show how easy it is to be avant-garde, and he goes 'Yeah, easy for you maybe; it's not easy!' Then he set me up with Johnas Mikas and Mikas watched it... it was interesting because eight or nine months later I got this postcard from him saying 'Roger, I just want you to know I think* Black Snow *is the most unforgettable film I've seen this year, which is saying a lot because I see about six pictures a day.'"*

Watkins on his early films: "Masque Of The Red Death *is the first roll of film I ever shot and looks it. About the best that can be said is that the colour has held up remarkably well over the years. I think it has something to do with a guy having his own Horrors Of The Black Museum or something. Who can tell? All of these films have one thing in common: they were edited entirely in the camera."*

Last House on Dead End Street

1972–73 aka *The Funhouse* working title: *The Cuckoo Clocks of Hell* dir: Roger Watkins, but credited instead to Victor Janos or Eric Jason (Enrique Jesutos) by the film's distributors See page 69.

Industrial films and Commercials

1976–77 Watkins: *"The industrials and commercials were done mostly on video tape at a studio owned by a guy named Pete Roma. Crap really. I remember one of the commercials was for a big hotel in New York City (the Paramount, I believe). Another was for a Jack La Lane Health spa and still another for some strip bar in Westchester. Industrials — mostly training films — for IBM, AT&T, GAF and others. None too exciting, although I did have a knack for getting some of the 'actresses' — and not just the go-go girls — to strip for the camera after hours. As Kraftwerk said in their song The Model, 'It only takes a camera to change her mind...'"*

Shadows of the Mind

1976 working title: *A Heritage of Blood* dir: Watkins, but credited instead to Bernie Travis wr: Watkins & Paul Jensen (also without credit) Watkins: *"Bernie Travis was a friend of the producer, probably his only one. Leo Fenton was the producer."* See page 122.

Spittoon

1980 dir: Roger Watkins An R-rated movie which stars Vanessa Del Rio, who would also appear in some of the director's later hardcore movies. Written by Watkins & Paul Jensen, *Spittoon* is a fictionalised account of Watkins' own bad experience making *Shadows of the Mind.* See page 121.

Her Name Was Lisa

1979 pr: Robert Michaels wr/dir: Richard Mahler (Watkins)

Lisa (Samantha Fox) lies in a coffin. Those who come to pay their last respects all have a story to tell... Cut to a photographic studio where beautiful models pose to a soundtrack of 'The Robots' by Kraftwerk. The photos incorporate images of guns held against heads and blood smeared on breasts. An aspiring young model by the name of Lisa rolls up for a job. She does a sexy dance for Paul, the photographer (who looks like he's wearing rouge), before playing with herself and giving him a blowjob. A multitude of sex positions follows, all to a suitably porno disco soundtrack and prominent slurping noises. Paul has a tan-line, and Lisa keeps her knickers suspended from one foot throughout. During a post coital cigarette he asks if she enjoyed it. Lisa replies that she's simply "jaded", pops a pill, and states that they're in business together and ought to keep their relationship business-like.

Paul receives a call from his best client, a big shot

publisher named Stephen Sweet (!) who essentially keeps the photographer solvent. He wants to meet the new girl, contrary to Paul's wishes. (*It should be noted that the character's name, 'Stephen Sweet,' would have very much been an in-joke, only now coming to light! The real Stephen Sweet is interviewed on page 110.*) Behind Paul's back, Lisa accepts money to sleep with Sweet, and ultimately moves in with him. Sweet's apartment is flash and modern. He encourages the girl to explore her kinky side, giving her a dominatrix outfit which she puts to good use on Sweet. Later, he gives Lisa some pills to make her "feel better — the more you take the better you feel". Sweet invites a couple of wild, rough looking guys over to the apartment (they call themselves Doc and Dopey), who slap Lisa around and rape her. Sweet ignores her pleas for help, and instead sits watching, jerking off. "Scared is better than scarred," one of the men says to the sobbing girl.

At a steam bath, Lisa comes into contact with a woman called Carmen (Vanessa del Rio) who is envious of Lisa's "detachment". Carmen's sympathy and affection results in the two women having sex.

Lisa masturbates for Sweet. Carmen arrives with a whip and the two girls put on a lesbian show. But do Sweet's ears deceive him? Amidst the sighs, slurps, groans and kisses, is Lisa saying to him, "I hate you"?

Sweet is aroused but his body is immobilised by the drug that Lisa has surreptitiously given to him. She takes the opportunity to don a strap-on dildo and bugger the screaming Sweet. "Take it up your bloody, fuckin' asshole!" she hollers vengefully.

Lisa shacks up with Carmen, who ends up treating her no better than Sweet. Ingesting pills and booze first thing in the morning, Lisa is then introduced to "the major league" — heroin. Carmen keeps the girl in a constant drug-induced passive state, placing her at disposal of kinky strangers. Powerless, Lisa observes all in distorted slow motion. Led Zep's Dazed And Confused plays on the soundtrack during one sexual encounter (the cum shot of which takes place over Jimmy Page's frenetic lead solo!).

Lisa is now a full-blown junkie who will do anything for a fix. The first time Carmen allows her to administer junk on her own, Lisa ODs. Cut to Lisa lying in state as we saw at the beginning of the movie. All the people in her life have come to pay their respects.

"100%! HIGHEST RATING! Finally a film I can rave about... Erotically Stupendous!"
—Hustler
"100%! The best sex film you'll see this year! Vanessa is DYNAMITE!!"
—Al Goldstein's Mag.
HER NAME WAS
Lisa
Starring VANESSA DEL RIO
SAMANTHA FOX COLOR X

The Pink Ladies

1980 dir: Robert Michaels (Watkins) Adult feature starring Vanessa Del Rio and Ron Jeremy (who sucks his own penis in one scene), described in *The X-Rated Videotape Guide* as "totally insane".

Cosmolitan Girls

1981 dir: Roger Watkins (no director credited on print) Adult feature starring Ron Jeremy, which follows a day in the life and the fantasies of three New Yorker women. States Watkins: *"Truly useless. I barely remember it."*

Obituaries

Watkins wrote this black comedy in 1982 and sold it to Harry Nilssen in 1985. It underwent a treatment at the hands of Nilssen and Terry Southern and the screenplay became *Obits*. Remains unmade. See page 133.

Midnight Heat

1982 pr: Robert Michaels dir: Richard Mahler (Watkins) Rain soaked New York streets. Alan (Jamie Gillis) is a killer for hire. Following a hit — a businessman he despatches with a revolver — Alan goes to the home of a woman with whom he is having an affair. But the husband walks in, a Mr Big who also happens to be Alan's boss. He kisses Gillis on the mouth and snarls, "I'll be seeing you on the streets."

Alan chooses to lay low in a cheap motel room. "I am Lazarus, come back from the dead. Come back to tell

you all," he drunkenly muses to no one. Finding a business card in a Bible, he calls the number of an escort agency and hires two girls — Shirley and Diane — to come over and perform lesbian sex. Afterwards he convinces Diane to stay. Alan reminisces about the wife who has left him (cue a sexual interlude), while observing the streets from the motel room window. He explains to Diane that someone is after him and that he's in hiding — the result of having become too wrapped up in the fantasy of living on the edge.

"I guess that's why I'm here," Diane responds, "I'm creating my own edge."

Another sexual interlude as Diane has a flashback to her own marriage.

Alan ponders on what his victims might have felt at the moment his bullets struck, before more flashbacks and sex with Diane.

Alan sits at his window as day turns to night. A final freeze frame reveals the newspaper headline: "Eight die in hotel fire."

(*The same hotel in which Alan is boarding? Who knows?*)

The sex scenes in *Midnight Heat* certainly appear of little concern to the director. They're a necessity, and the film — an otherwise interesting, brooding tale, with plenty of philosphopic musing — stumbles irritably over them. Indeed, the sex in *Midnight Heat* is cloaked by slow motion effects, a barrage of thunder cracks, and other post-production tweaks. The sex between Alan and Diane pretty much spells out Watkins' disdain for porno: masked in half-light, concealing genitalia, it is somewhat depreciating of the genre of which it is a part.

Corruption

1984 wr/dr/pr: Richard Mahler (Watkins) A board meeting is taking place in a large office complex. Williams (Jamie Gillis) is addressing his associates on contractual obligations. Cut to a guy called Alan entering a darkened, dilapidated building. "I'm the person behind the desk," says a woman sat behind a desk. Alan has been hired to collect something for Williams. "It won't be easy getting it to where it belongs," reprimands the woman, pointing Alan toward a door. Behind the door Alan finds a blue room and a woman in a chair who starts to masturbate. "Just sit there and watch me fuck myself," she says. Afterwards, she explains that she's given up on her fellow man, and what Alan is looking for is behind the next door. Alan enters a second, completely orange room with a woman in its centre wearing orange underwear. "Eat me," she says. "Not on the lips." Giving him a blow job, the woman stops short of allowing Alan to come, and tells him he has just one more door to go through. The next chamber is completely black. The woman in it vacantly advises Alan that in order to get what he wants he has to "renounce love". She shows no emotion when Alan has sex with her, and when he comes tells him to leave. The woman at the front desk is gone but there's a briefcase waiting for Alan.

At home Williams has still yet to hear from Alan, his "messenger". Following a bout of sex with Doreen, his girlfriend, and secretly observing Doreen's sister masturbate, Williams travels to a sleazy bar owned by Larry (Bobby Astyr), his half-brother. Larry leads him to a corridor beneath the bar where there is a set of

Watkins would seem to have little interest in his adult film work, most of which he conducted under the guise of 'Richard Mahler'. (In a letter to the author he stated: "Did I mention the non career move my career took from 1979–1985?...") Richard Mahler is lauded by critics as one the porn industry's true great filmmakers however, and *American Babylon* as one of the last great adult films to come out of New York.*

"When you're beginning to think that porn-film producers have no imagination," wrote Robert H Rimmer in The X-Rated Videotape Guide, *"try a Richard Mahler film. Mahler gives everyday reality a surrealist touch, which will keep you watching and wondering what is happening and what is going to happen next."*

** It should be noted that porn director Richard Mailer (*Angel's Revenge, Angel of the Night, *etc) and Richard Mahler (aka Watkins) are not one and the same.*

doors, each with a peephole. The peephole in the first door reveals a woman taking a shower. A second woman walks into view and the two of them make out. Williams moves onto the next door and observes a dominatrix with a masked man. The dominatrix demands that her masked slave behave himself and lick her whip, but when he removes his mask, Williams sees that the man looks just like him. "But it's not you," says an amused Larry, "you're out here."

Williams looks through the final peephole — because "he has no choice" — and sees a young woman lying in state. A man in clown makeup begins to remove her clothes, all the while repeating "Cold... cold..." Laughing, he then frigs and fucks the corpse.

"I've seen enough," announces Williams, but Larry refuses to let him turn away, stating that the show is almost over. When the man in this room looks up, Williams notes that it looks just like Larry.

Sat at a table with Larry and Alan, Williams insists on getting what is rightly his, but is told instead that he made a deal with the wrong people and that Alan is prepared to sell "it" to the highest bidder.

In an attempt to provoke Williams, Doreen's younger sister Felicia is taken hostage. Williams ponders his dilemma with an unidentified female (played by Vanessa Del Rio).

"Things'll be changing soon," she says.

"Better or worse?" Williams responds.

"Just changing."

Williams arranges for Larry to take care of Alan. This he does by shooting him, as well as Felicia and the captor who happens to be servicing her.

In the end Williams gets his suitcase, but with it he now has his half-brother Larry as a partner.

In many ways, this deliberately obtuse yarn comes over as a prequel to *Midnight Heat*. The central role is again played by Gillis, who again has a dark secret to hide. By the end of *Corruption*, his secret has succeeded only in casting an even darker shadow over him — one that could be interpreted as the bridge from his businessman persona to that of hitman in *Midnight Heat*.

Sex scenes aside, Gillis proves himself a truly fine and compelling actor, bringing to his roles an introverted edginess. It's the kind of performance that soars head and shoulders over what typical constitutes 'acting' in a porn feature, and certainly wouldn't be lost in a mainstream feature.

American Babylon

1984 pr/dir: Richard Mahler (Watkins) Robert (Bobby Astyr) and Tom (Michael Gaunt) are neighbours who spend their time together watching Robert's collection of porn movies and discussing matters of sex, their wives and the meaning of life. Robert's infatuation with porn has caused him to neglect his wife Joan, who turns to Tom for sexual release...

Decadence

1988 dir: Jack Fox & Richard Mahler (Watkins) Adult feature with a sci fi premise: viewers of a porn film are able to interact with the participants in the film, becoming participants themselves. See page 73.

A Museum Is Where You Find It

In production Watkins: *"[A Museum Is Where You Find It is the] first thing in years I am actually enjoying. Met a seventy-eight-year-old guy named Tony in a gin mill in Nyack and was quite taken by his filial devotion to his mother. She was an interesting artist back in the forties and fifties and he is currently building a museum to house her paintings in Poughkeepsie, New York, next to Vassar College, where his mother went to school. It is the most pleasurable film making experience I have had in some time even if it is video tape. I have intentionally kept the clock running in frame because, after all, though a museum may give the impression of time frozen, one has no choice but to heed Andrew Marvel's dictum all about 'time's winged chariot hurrying near'..."* ■

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